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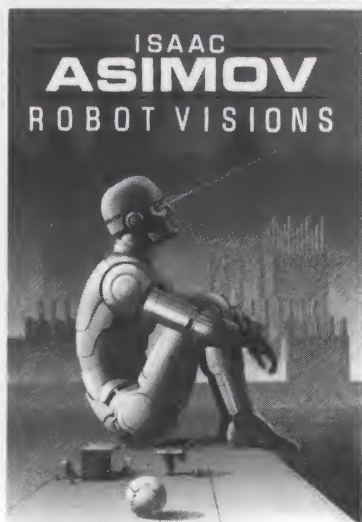
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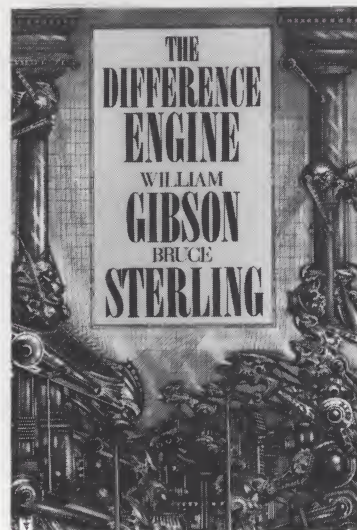
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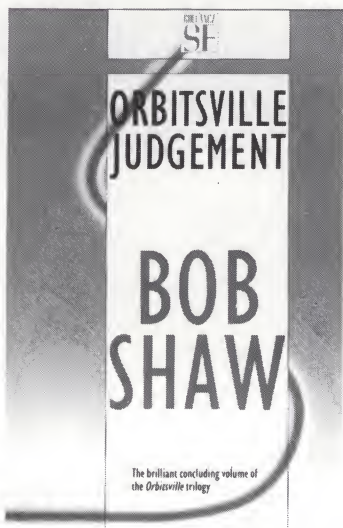


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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 40

October 1990

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Interface

David Pringle

Here's our fortieth issue, adorned by the longest piece of fiction we have ever published in one part. **William Gibson** and **Bruce Sterling's** "The Angel of Goliad" is the free-standing opening section of their forthcoming novel, *The Difference Engine*. The book is due from Gollancz in a few weeks' time, but it will not appear in the authors' homeland until early 1991. We're pleased to be making part of it available to readers for the first time anywhere.

This issue also features stories from **Richard Calder**, **John Gribbin**, new writer **Chris Beckett**, and "The Peace and Love Corporation" (alias Messrs **Newman**, **Gaiman** and **Byrne**). All good stuff. But, as far as the fiction is concerned, it's another all-male lineup, I'm afraid – as were issues 35, 36 and 37. We don't relish "men-only" issues, even if they sometimes prove necessary because of an apparent dearth of good female sf writers in Britain. To compensate, we're now planning a special All-Female *Interzone*, which will consist entirely of fiction and non-fiction by women. That will be number 42, out two months from now. If it proves successful, we may repeat the exercise from time to time.

SPECIAL ISSUES

We've also been toying with the idea of special regional and national issues of *Interzone*. How would readers respond to a Yorkshire number, a Scottish number, or, for that matter, an all-Canadian or all-Australian issue? Perhaps we'll do them one day. Almost anything is possible, now we're monthly.

Come to think of it, we could have put together a **Buddy Holly** issue, or, at any rate, a Rock 'n' Roll one. The singer appears in John Gribbin's story, and we've just accepted another piece (which will probably see print in number 43) which also has him as a lead character. A long time ago, we ran an Elvis Presley story, and a John Lennon one, and a Bob Dylan one. Now, for no apparent reason, it seems to be Holly's turn. Meanwhile, another promising manuscript has arrived which features blues singer Robert Johnson...Enough!

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

Two bits of good news about non-fiction books. **John Clute** has told me that a second edition of *The Encyclopedia*

of Science Fiction is now definitely scheduled. To be co-authored by Clute and **Peter Nicholls**, and projected to be at least 200,000 words longer than the mammoth first edition (1979), it will appear from Macdonald/Orbit as their lead non-fiction hardcover title in the autumn of 1991. John and Peter will be working intensively on this project between now and next summer, faxing entries backwards and forwards between England and Australia (where Nicholls now lives). They have said they would welcome any suggestions, corrections and additions from *Interzone* readers. If you have any constructive comments to make on the first edition (after all these years!), please write to John Clute care of this magazine's address.

The other news is that **Kim Newman** and **Stephen Jones** have recently been given the Bram Stoker Award for the best non-fiction title associated with the horror-fiction field published in America in 1989. The winning item was their *Horror: 100 Best Books*, which appeared in the UK from Xanadu Publications in late 1988. This is now curiously hard to obtain in Britain, but a new trade-paperback edition recently appeared from the US publishers, Carroll & Graf. Kim and Steve made a weekend trip to America to accept the award at the convention of the Horror Writers of America in Providence, Rhode Island.

RISING PRICES

UK postal rates are up this month, and our other costs have also risen. Meanwhile the magazine's cover price remains £1.95 – unchanged since 1987. The good news is that we do not propose to raise the cover price yet: it should hold good at least until the spring of 1991. The bad news is that we are obliged to raise subscription rates for overseas subscribers, with effect from this issue. These have in fact been underpriced for some time, and rising postal costs have made them still more unrealistic. Much as we are loth to make *Interzone* more expensive for our foreign readers, we now have no choice but to pass on more of the postage expense to them. Sorry. Full details are given on page 3.

Please also note that we are now able to accept credit card payments from both inland and overseas subscribers; however, these must be specified in pounds sterling, not US dollars or any other currency which is foreign to us.

(We look forward to the day when European readers, at any rate, will be able to subscribe in a unified European currency.) A final word to overseas subscribers: the mailing house which we began using over a year ago, Mail International Ltd in Burgess Hill, Sussex, is able to send overseas copies by "accelerated surface mail," which we find is very much faster than ordinary sea mail. It's also very much cheaper than airmail. So we recommend that you do not ask for an airmail subscription unless you are extremely keen to read our words swiftly – and unless you are willing to pay a £6 (\$10) per annum surcharge for the extra postage cost.

SO MANY MAGAZINES, CONTINUED

Last issue, I mentioned various new British sf/fantasy magazines, including the bimonthly science-fiction title **R.E.M.** and the monthly horror mag **Skeleton Crew**. (Another new magazine announced earlier this year, Andrew Coates' **Psyko Candy**, seems to be on indefinite hold, alas.)

Two fringe magazines ceased publication (I think) earlier this year: the fantasy games magazine **GM** and the Starburst-lookalike, **Fantasy Zone**. Now the former is being revived under the title **Games Master International** and with the backing of an established company, Newsfield. According to advance publicity, it will have an initial print-run in the region of 40,000 – quite large by British standards, though still some way short of the nearly 60,000 circulation of **Games Workshop's White Dwarf**. I don't know whether **GM International** will carry any fiction; but the appearance of this and the aforementioned magazines certainly means there is now a plethora of markets for freelance journalists working in the sf/fantasy/horror areas.

The sf small press is also active, with **Works** (ed. Dave W. Hughes), **The Edge** (ed. Graham Evans) and **BBR** (formerly **Back Brain Recluse**, ed. Chris Reed) all seeming to make serious attempts to gain wider circulation and at least semi-professional status. Other new small publications are springing up all the time (watch our "Magazines Received" column and the various adverts which appear herein). It has recently been announced that a group of people are planning to start a new bimonthly fantasy magazine called **Amaranth**. If that one takes off, and all

the others survive, we may be suffering from a glut of British sf/fantasy magazines before long. How things have changed since the lean years of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s.

SAD NEWS

I've just heard that the publishing house of **Unwin Hyman Ltd** has been taken over by the giant Harper-Collins (part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, and owners of Grafton Books). I find this really rather sad. It's not that Collins and Grafton are bad publishing houses – far from it. They've both done a great deal for sf and fantasy, and between them they publish most of the major British writers (Aldiss, Ballard, Barker...). For goodness' sake, they also publish me – my book *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction* is forthcoming from Grafton this November, as I announced some time ago – and I'm grateful, honestly: wonderful people, wonderful publishers!

But it is sad that Unwin Hyman, one of the last relatively small, independent and dedicated publishers of science fiction and fantasy in this country should have been absorbed by what is rapidly becoming the biggest conglomerate of them all. Presumably, Harper-Collins were attracted by the lucrative rights to **J. R. R. Tolkien's** works. But what will become of **Gill Alderman**, **M. John Harrison**, **Geoff Ryman**, **Colin Greenland** and, for that matter, **Simon D. Ings** (who recently sold his first novel to Unwin)? The readiness over the past few years of Unwin Hyman's sf editor **Jane Johnson** to take on some of the most wayward and interesting writers in British imaginative fiction has been exemplary. Will she keep her job? Will Unwin retain a nominally separate identity, or be absorbed into Grafton Books or Collins/Fontana? I don't know the answers to these questions, though perhaps they will have become clear by the time these words see print.

(David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:

I have discovered from your questionnaire results that a 38-year-old mother of two daughters who is a part-time secretary and doesn't read *The Guardian* is very much a minority group as far as *IZ* readership goes! However, I do return your questionnaires and have noted your displeasure with the gender imbalance, so feel moved to offer you my comments, whether you find them useful or not.

The past two months of my life have been a continuous pig-out on textbooks and chocolate, preparing for the

looming menace of exams in early June. The menace has been duly faced and I've spent the past evenings pigging out on *IZ* issues 35 and 36, hoarded for my post-exam treat. Tonight's "goodie" is issue 37, just disinterred from its plastic overcoat. What a feast! My *IZ* diet so far (since issue 26) has consisted of curate's eggs, albeit good enough overall to keep me subscribing for another nibble. However, issue 36 had nothing on the menu that I didn't like – stories, illustrations and features combined into something I couldn't fault, with "The Original Dr Shade" and "The Braining of Mother Lamprey" as the pieces-de-resistance. I support the comment that we should hear more of Simon Ings: an average mum like me finds warped fetuses and cannibal toddlers a pretty rich diet, but the extent to which unbelievable piled upon gruesome and then descended into farce made me laugh out loud. Mind you, much as I applaud Mr Ings' sense of humour, I'm glad I can't see into his imagination.

It should be obvious to you that I feel *IZ* is going from strength to strength, and that the decision to publish monthly has been fully justified by the quality of the last two issues alone. I wish the editorial team every success and I have confidence that this wish will come true.

Susanne Leeson
Bollington, Cheshire

Dear Editors:

These monthly issues come along quickly now – very nice! The June issue was high quality too, with impressive work from the three newer writers. I liked the Reynolds for story and setting, the Widdowson for atmosphere (you obviously will encourage him to write more often, please), and the Ings for its sheer energy. My only reservations about this excellent issue was that every story seemed to lose intensity towards the end, and I prefer the story grip to increase rather than fade. But otherwise this bodes extremely well for your future as a monthly.

I like the suggestion by D. Inkersole in "Interaction" for articles on past writers. Probably short fillers rather than major "Big Sellers" critiques, but yes please. I too have *Light a Last Candle* and would be interested to learn who Vincent King was and where to find more of his work (*Candy Man*?)

Another idea occurs to me, as I have just read and re-read Charles Platt's cautionary tale. I enjoy reading about the writing of sf most of all your articles, and apparently 54% of your readers are would-be writers, so why not articles in a hints/how to series for sf writers? Even material recycled from BSFA's *Focus* would be new to 82% of your readers. Think about it.

David Redd
Haverfordwest, Dyfed

Dear Editors:

Very brave of David Pringle, to be sure, to publish Charles Platt's excellent "Fairly Rich, Fairly Quick" article (*IZ* 36). Platt brilliantly highlighted the absurdly juvenile nature of things like "Warhammer." It is impossible to take seriously a group of people who play games involving imaginary trolls, goblins and heroic swordsmen. Platt's hack, derivative approach to the novel is surely exactly what the gameplayers want, and deserve.

I think the article illustrates the wider issue of the state of modern fantasy in general. *IZ* 36 highlights this perfectly. Accompanying an inventive sporadically brilliant Kim Newman story (although compromised by its intrusive politics), an excellent, thoughtful story from Greg Egan, and a stylish piece from Steve Widdowson was a piece of unreadable, utterly derivative fantasy driven from Simon Ings. It was painfully out of place in the magazine. All the other stories were intelligent and thoughtful, this however, with its stupid creatures, and its absurdly-named dung-eating people, was moronic. And it's typical of a genre trapped in endless cycles of stereotypes and clichés.

There's nothing wrong with fantasy in general, of course – *Alice In Wonderland* was a fantasy, so too was *Gulliver's Travels* and John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*; even the novels of Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs could be called fantasies, but when "fantasy" means the regurgitation of regressive olde-worlde Tolkien-esque clichés without a single brain cell or ounce of literary merit on display – like "The Braining of Mother Lamprey" – then it's just an absurdly anachronistic and bankrupt genre.

Put Mr Ings in touch with the "Warhammer" people and let *IZ* concentrate on the intelligent futuristic fiction it normally publishes.

Craig Turner
Saffron Walden

Dear Editors:

I really feel I have to comment on Platt's article in the June issue. As a bad writer with the lack of success I thoroughly deserve, I'm the last person to point this out... but it strikes me that he's missing the point about fantasy entirely.

It's an almost purely emotional area: it's about plugging into images and stringing them together and messing them up. In the good stuff, whatever the technical skills, wherever the images derive from, there's something hot under the surface – a real involvement, a delight in pulling a doll's head off for the sake of it, a hungry exhilaration that bursts through and pulls your heart into your mouth.

Continued on page 74

THE ANGEL OF GOLIAD

A SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE

BY
MESSRS.

WILLIAM GIBSON
AND
BRUCE STERLING



It was 15th January 1855. A room in Grand's Hotel, Piccadilly. Within the room, a chair was propped backward, wedged securely beneath the door's cut-glass knob. Another chair was draped with clothing: a woman's fringed mantelet, a mud-crust skirt of heavy worsted, a man's checked trousers and cutaway coat.

Two forms lay beneath the bedclothes of the laminated maple four-poster. And off in the iron grip of winter Big Ben bellowed ten o'clock, great hoarse callopie sounds, the coal-fired breath of London.

Sybil Gerard slid her feet through icy linens to the warmth of the ceramic bottle in its wrap of flannel. Her toes brushed his shin. The touch seemed to start him from deep deliberation. That was how he was, this Dandy Mick Radley.

She'd met Mick Radley at Laurent's Dancing Academy, down Windmill Street. Now she knew him, he seemed more the sort for Kellner's in Leicester Square, or even the Portland Rooms. He was always thinking, scheming, muttering over something in his head. Clever, clever. It worried her. And Mrs Winter-

halter wouldn't have approved, for the handling of "political gentlemen" required delicacy and discretion, qualities Mrs Winterhalter believed she had aplenty, while crediting none to her girls.

"No more dollymopping, Sybil," Mick said. One of his pronouncements, something about which he'd made up his clever mind.

Sybil grinned up at him, her face half-hidden by the blanket's warm edge. She knew he liked the grin. Her wicked-girl grin. He can't mean that, she thought. Make a joke of it, she told herself. "But if I weren't a wicked dollymop, would I be here with you now?"

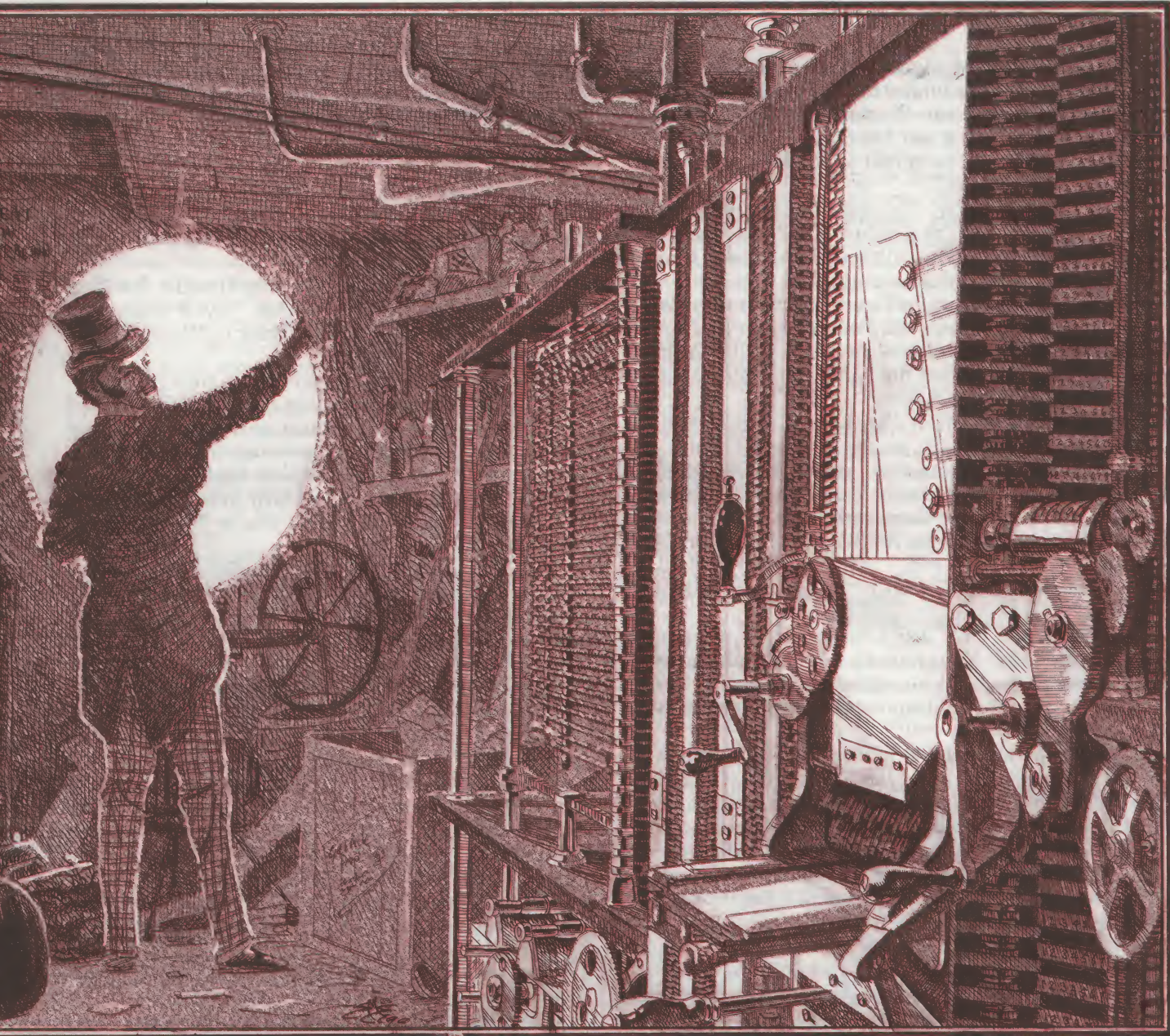
"No more playing bobtail."

"You know I only go with gentlemen."

Mick sniffed, amused. "Call me a gentleman, then?"

"A very flash gentleman," Sybil said, flattering him. "One of the fancy. You know I don't care for the Rad Lords. I spit on 'em, Mick."

Sybil shivered, but not unhappily, for she'd run into a good bit of luck here, full of steak-and-taters and hot chocolate, in bed between clean sheets in a fashionable hotel. A shiny new hotel with central



steam-heating, though she'd gladly have traded the restless gurgling and banging of the scrolled gilt radiator for the glow of a well-banked hearth.

And he was a good-looking cove, this Mick Radley, she had to admit, dressed very flash, had the tin and was generous with it, and he'd yet to demand anything peculiar or beastly. She knew it wouldn't last, as Mick was a touring gent from Manchester, and would be gone soon enough. But there was profit in him, and maybe more when he left her, if she made him feel sorry about it, and generous.

Mick reclined into fat feather pillows and slid his manicured fingers behind his spit-curved head. Silk nightshirt all frothy with lace down the front – only the best for Mick. Now he seemed to want to talk a bit. Men did, usually, after a while – about their wives, mostly.

But for Dandy Mick, it was always politics. "So, you hate the lordships, Sybil?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Sybil said. "I have my reasons."

"I should say you do," Mick said slowly, and the look he gave her then, of cool superiority, sent a shiver through her.

"What d'you mean by that, Mick?"

"I know your reasons for hating the Government. I have your number."

Surprise seeped into her, then fear. She sat up in bed. There was a taste in her mouth like cold iron.

"You keep your card in your bag," he said. "I took that number to a rum magistrate I know. He ran it through a government Engine for me, and printed up your Bow Street file, rat-a-tat-tat, like fun." He smirked. "So I know all about you, girl. Know who you are..."

She tried to put a bold face on it. "And who's that, then, Mr Radley?"

"No Sybil Jones, dearie. You're Sybil Gerard, the daughter of Walter Gerard, the Luddite agitator."

He'd raided her hidden past.

Machines, whirring somewhere, spinning out history.

Now Mick watched her face, smiling at what he saw there, and she recognized a look she'd seen before, at Laurent's, when first he'd spied her across the crowded floor. A hungry look.

Her voice shook. "How long have you known about me?"

"Since our second night. You know I travel with the General. Like any important man, he has enemies. As his secretary and man-of-affairs, I take few chances with strangers." Mick put his cruel, deft little hand on her shoulder. "You might have been someone's agent. It was business."

Sybil flinched away. "Spying on a helpless girl," she said at last. "You're a right bastard, you are!"

But her foul word scarcely seemed to touch him – he was cold and hard, like a judge or a lordship. "I may spy, girl, but I use the Government's machinery for my own sweet purposes. I'm no copper's nark, to look down my nose at a revolutionary like Walter Gerard – no matter what the Rad Lords may call him now. Your father was a hero."

He shifted on the pillow. "My hero – that was Walter Gerard. I saw him speak, on the Rights of Labour, in Manchester. He was a marvel – we all cheered till our throats was raw! The good old Hell-Cats..." Mick's smooth voice had gone sharp and flat, in a Mancunian tang. "Ever hear tell of the Hell-Cats, Sybil? In the old days?"

"A street-gang," Sybil said. "Rough boys in Manchester."

Mick frowned. "We was a brotherhood! A friendship youth guild! Your father knew us well. He was our patron politician, you might say."

"I'd prefer it if you didn't speak of my father, Mr Radley."

Mick shook his head at her impatiently. "When I heard they'd tried and hanged him –" the words like ice behind her ribs – "me and the lads, we took up torches and crowbars, and we ran hot and wild... That was Ned Ludd's work, girl! Years ago..." He picked delicately at the front of his nightshirt. "'Tis not a tale I tell to many. The Government's Engines have long memories."

She understood it now – Mick's generosity and his sweet-talk, the strange hints he'd aimed at her, of secret plans and better fortune, marked cards and hidden aces. He was pulling her strings, making her his creature. The daughter of Walter Gerard was a fancy prize, for a man like Mick.

She pulled herself out of bed, stepping across icy floorboards in her pantalettes and chemise. She dug quickly, silently, through the heap of her clothing. The fringed mantelet, the jacket, the great sagging cage of her crinoline skirt. The jingling white cuirass of her corset.

"Get back in bed," Mick said lazily, "don't get your monkey up, 'tis cold out there." He shook his head. "'Tis not like you think, Sybil."

She refused to look at him, struggling into her corset by the window, where frost-caked glass cut the upwashed glare of gaslight from the street. She cinched the corset's laces tight across her back with a quick practiced snap of her wrists.

"Or if it is," Mick mused, watching her, "'tis only in small degree."

Across the street, the opera had let out – gentry in their cloaks and top hats. Cab-horses, their backs in blankets, stamped and shivered on the black macadam. White traces of clean suburban snow still

clung to the gleaming coachwork of some lordship's steam-gurney. Tarts were working the crowd. Poor wretched souls. Hard indeed to find a kind face amid those goffered shirts and diamond studs, on such a cold night. Sybil turned toward Mick, confused, angry, and very much afraid. "Who did you tell about me?"

"Not a living soul," Mick said, "not even my friend the General. And I won't be peaching on you. Nobody's ever said Mick Radley's indiscreet. So get back in bed."

"I shan't," Sybil said, standing straight, her bare feet freezing on the floorboards. "Sybil Jones may share your bed – but the daughter of Walter Gerard is a personage of substance!"

Mick blinked at her, surprised. He thought it over, rubbing his narrow chin, then nodded. "'Tis my sad loss, then, Miss Gerard." He sat up in bed and pointed at the door, with a dramatic sweep of his arm. "Put on your skirt, then, and your brass-heeled dolly boots, Miss Gerard, and out the door with you and your substance. But 'twould be a great shame if you left. I've uses for a clever girl."

"I should say you do, you blackguard," said Sybil, but she hesitated. He had another card to play – she could sense it in the set of his face.

He grinned at her, his eyes slitted. "Have you ever been to Paris, Sybil?"

"Paris?" Her breath clouded in midair.

"Yes," he said, "the gay and the glamorous, next destination for the General, when his London lecture tour is done." Dandy Mick plucked at his lace cuffs. "What those uses are, that I mentioned, I shan't as yet say. But the General is a man of deep stratagem. And the Government of France have certain difficulties that require the help of experts..." He leered triumphantly. "But I can see that I bore you, eh?"

Sybil shifted from foot to foot. "You'll take me to Paris, Mick," she said slowly, "and that's the true bill, no snicky humbugging?"

"Strictly square and level. If you don't believe me, I've a ticket in my coat for the Dover ferry."

Sybil walked to the brocade armchair in the corner, and tugged at Mick's greatcoat. She shivered uncontrollably, and slipped the greatcoat on. Fine dark wool, like being wrapped in warm money.

"Try the right front pocket," Mick told her. "The card-case." He was amused and confident – as if it were funny that she didn't trust him. Sybil thrust her chilled hands into both pockets. Deep, plush-lined...

Her left hand gripped a lump of hard cold metal. She drew out a nasty little pepperbox derringer. Ivory handle, intricate gleam of steel hammers and brass cartridges, small as her hand but heavy.

"Naughty," said Mick, frowning. "Put it back, there's a girl."

Sybil put the thing away, gently but quickly, as if it were a live crab. In the other pocket she found his card-case, red morocco leather; inside were business cards, *cartes-de-visite* with his Engine-stippled portrait, a London train timetable.

And an engraved slip of stiff creamy parchment, first class passage on the *Newcomen*, out of Dover.

"You'll need two tickets, then," she hesitated, "if you really mean to take me."

Mick nodded, conceding the point. "And another

for the train from Cherbourg, too. Nothing simpler. I can wire for tickets, downstairs at the lobby desk."

Sybil shivered again, and wrapped the coat closer. Mick laughed at her. "Don't give me that vinegar phiz. You're still thinking like a dollymop; stop it. Start thinking flash, or you'll be of no use to me. You're Mick's gal now – a high-flyer."

She spoke slowly, reluctantly. "I've never been with any man knew I was Sybil Gerard." That was a lie, of course – there was Egremont, the man who had ruined her. Charles Egremont had known very well who she was. But Egremont no longer mattered – he lived in a different world, now, with his po-faced respectable wife, and his respectable children, and his respectable seat in Parliament.

And Sybil hadn't been dollymopping, with Egremont. Not exactly, anyway. A matter of degree...

She could tell that Mick was pleased at the lie she'd told him. It had flattered him.

Mick opened a gleaming oblong cigar-case, extracted a cheroot, and lit it in the oily flare of a repeating match, filling the room with the candied smell of cherry tobacco.

"So now you feel a bit shy with me, do you?" he said at last. "Well, I prefer it that way. What I know, that gives me a bit more grip on you, don't it, than mere tin."

His eyes narrowed. "It's what a cove knows that counts, ain't it, Sybil? More than land or money, more than birth. *Information*. Very flash."

Sybil felt a moment of hatred for him, for his ease and confidence. Pure resentment, sharp and primal, but she crushed her feelings down. The hatred wavered, losing its purity, turning to shame. She did hate him – but only because he truly knew her. He knew how far Sybil Gerard had fallen, that she had been an educated girl, with airs and graces, as good as any gentry girl, once.

From the days of her father's fame, from her girlhood, Sybil could remember Mick Radley's like. She knew the kind of boy that he had been. Ragged angry factory-boys, penny-a-score, who would crowd her father after his torchlight speeches, and do whatever he commanded. Rip up railroad tracks, kick the boiler-plugs out of spinning jennies, lay policemen's helmets by his feet. She and her father had fled from town to town, often by night, living in cellars, attics, anonymous rooms-to-let, hiding from the Rad police and the daggers of other conspirators. And sometimes, when his own wild speeches had filled him with a burning elation, her father would embrace her and soberly promise her the world. She would live like gentry in a green and quiet England, when King Steam was wrecked. When Byron and his Industrial Radicals were utterly destroyed...

But a hempen rope had choked her father into silence. The Radicals ruled on and on, moving from triumph to triumph, shuffling the world like a deck of cards. And now Mick Radley was up in the world, and Sybil Gerard was down.

She stood there silently, wrapped in Mick's coat. Paris. The promise tempted her, and when she let herself believe him, there was a thrill behind it like lightning. She forced herself to think about leaving her life in London. It was a bad, a low, a sordid life,

she knew, but not entirely desperate. She still had things to lose. Her rented room in Whitechapel, and dear Toby, her cat. There was Mrs Winterhalter, who arranged meetings between fast girls and political gentleman. Mrs Winterhalter was a bawd, but ladylike and steady, and her sort was difficult to find. And she would lose her two steady gentlemen, Mr Chadwick and Mr Kingsley, who each saw her twice a month. It was steady tin, that kept her from the street. But Chadwick had a jealous wife in Fulham; and, in a moment of foolishness, Sybil had stolen Kingsley's best cufflinks, and she knew that he suspected.

And neither man was half so free with his money as Dandy Mick.

She forced herself to smile at him, as sweetly as she could. "You're a rum'un, Mick Radley. You know you've got my leading-strings. Perhaps I was vexed with you at first, but I'm not so cakey as I don't know a rum gentleman when I see one."

Mick blew smoke. "You are a clever one," he said admiringly. "You talk blarney like an angel. You're not fooling me, though, so you needn't deceive yourself. Still, you're just the gal I need. Get back in bed."

She did as he told her.

"Jove," he said, "your blessed feet are two lumps of ice. Why don't you wear little slippers, eh?" He tugged at her corset, with determination. "Slippers, and black silk stockings," he said. "A gal looks very flash in bed, with black silk stockings."

From the far end of the glass-topped counter, one of Aaron's shopmen gave Sybil the cold eye, standing haughty and tall in his neat black coat and polished boots. He knew something was up – he could smell it. Sybil waited for Mick to pay, hands folded before her on her skirt, demure, but watching sidelong from beneath the blue fringe of her bonnet. Under her skirt, wadded through the frame of her crinoline, was the shawl she'd nicked while Radley tried on top hats.

Sybil had learned how to nick things – she'd taught herself. It simply took nerve, that was the secret. It took pluck. Look neither right nor left – just grab, lift her skirt, stuff and rustle. Then stand quite straight, with a psalm-singing look, like a gentry girl.

The floorman had lost interest in her; he was watching a fat man fingering watered-silk braces. Sybil checked her skirt quickly. No bulge showed.

A young spotty-faced clerk, with inkstained thumbs, set Mick's number into a counter-top credit-machine. Zip, click, a pull on the ebony-handled lever, and it was done. He gave Mick his printed purchase slip and did the parcel up in string and crisp green paper.

Aaron & Son would never miss a cashmere shawl. Perhaps their account-engines would, when they tallied up, but the loss couldn't hurt them; their shopping-palace was too big and too rich. All those Greek columns, chandeliers of Irish crystal, a million mirrors – room after gilded room, stuffed with rubber riding boots and French-milled soap, walking-sticks, umbrellas, cutlery, locked glass cases crammed with silver plate and ivory brooches and lovely wind-up golden music boxes... And this was only one of a dozen in a chain. But for all of that, she knew, Aaron's wasn't truly smart, not a gentry place.

But couldn't you just do anything with money in England, if you were clever? Someday Mr Aaron, a whiskery old merchant Jew from Whitechapel, would have a lordship, with a steam-gurney waiting at the curb and his own coat of arms on the coachwork. The Rad Parliament wouldn't care that Mr Aaron was no Christian. They'd given Charles Darwin a lordship, and he said that Adam and Eve were monkeys.

The liftman, got up in a Frenchified livery, drew the rattling brass gate aside for her. Mick followed her in, his parcel tucked under his arm, and then they were descending.

They emerged from Aaron's into the jostle of Whitechapel. While Mick checked a street-map he took from his coat, she gazed up at the shifting letters that ran the length of Aaron's frontage. A mechanical frieze, a simple sort of kinetrope for Aaron's adverts, made of little bits of painted wood, clicking about each in turn, behind leaded sheets of bevel-glass. CONVERT YOUR PIANO, the jostling letters suggested, INTO A KASTNER'S PIANOLA.

The London skyline west of Whitechapel was full of construction cranes, stark steel skeletons painted with red lead against the damp. Older buildings were furred with scaffolding; what wasn't being torn down, it seemed, to make way for the new, was being rebuilt in its image. There was a distant huffing of excavation, and a tremulous feeling from below the pavement, of vast machines cutting some new underground line.

But now Mick turned left, without a word, and walked away, his hat cocked to one side, his chequered trouser-legs flashing under the long-hem of his great-coat. She had to hurry to match his step. A ragged boy with a numbered tin badge was sweeping mucky snow from the crossing; Mick tossed him a penny without breaking stride and headed down the lane called Butcher Row.

She caught up and took his arm, past red and white carcasses dangling from their black iron hooks, beef and mutton and veal, and thick men in their stained aprons crying their goods. London women crowded there in scores, wicker baskets on their arms. Servants, cooks, respectable wives with men at home. A red-faced squinting butcher lurched in front of Sybil with a double handful of blue meat. "Hallo pretty missus, buy your gentleman my nice kidneys for pie!" Sybil ducked her head and walked around him.

Parked barrows crowded the curb, where costers stood bellowing, their velveteen coats set off with buttons of brass or pearl. Each had his numbered badge, though fully half the numbers were slang, Mick claimed, as slang as the coster's weights and measures. There were blankets and baskets spread on neatly chalked squares on the paving, and Mick was telling her of ways the costers had to plump out shrunken fruit, and weave dead eels in with live. She smiled at the pleasure he seemed to take in knowing such things, while hawkers yelped about their brooms and soap and candles, and a scowling organ-grinder cranked, two-handed, at his symphony machine, filling the street with a fast springy racket of bells, piano-wire and steel.

Mick stopped beside a wooden trestle-table kept by a squint-eyed widow in bombazine, the stump of a clay pipe protruding from her thin lips. Arrayed before her were numerous vials

of some viscous-looking substance Sybil took to be a patent medicine, for each was pasted with a blue slip of paper bearing the blurred image of a savage red Indian. "And what would this be, mother?" Mick enquired, tapping one red-waxed cork with a gloved finger.

"Rock oil, mister," she said, relinquishing the stem of her pipe, "much as they call Barbados tar." Her drawling accent grated on the ear, but Sybil felt a pang of pity. How far the woman was from whatever outlandish place she'd once called home.

"Really," Mick asked, "it wouldn't be Texian?"

"'Healthful balm,'" the widow said, "'from nature's secret spring, the bloom of health and life, to man will bring.' Skimmed by the savage Seneca from the waters of Pennsylvania's great Oil Creek, mister. Three pennies the vial and a guaranteed cure-all." The woman was peering up at Mick now with a queer expression, her pale eyes screwed tight in nests of wrinkles, as though she might recall his face. Sybil shivered.

"Good day to you, then, mother," Mick said, with a smile that somehow reminded Sybil of a vice detective she'd known, a sandy little man who worked Leicester Square and Soho; the Badger, the girls had called him.

"What is it?" she asked, taking Mick's arm as he turned to go. "What is it she's selling?"

"Rock oil," Mick said, and she caught his sharp glance back at the hunched black figure. "The General tells me it bubbles from the ground, in Texas..."

Sybil was curious. "Is it a proper cure-all, then?"

"Never mind," he said, "and here's an end to chat." He was glancing bright-eyed down the lane. "I see one, and you know what to do."

Sybil nodded, and began to pick her way through the market-crowd toward the man Mick had seen. He was a ballad-seller, lean and hollow-cheeked, his hair long and greasy under a tall hat wrapped in bright polka-dot fabric. He held both his arms bent; hands knotted as if in prayer, the sleeves of his rumpled jacket heavy with long rustling quires of sheet-music.

"'Railway to Heaven,' ladies and gents," the ballad-seller chanted, a veteran patterer. "'Of truth divine the rails are made, and on the Rock of Ages laid; the rails are fixed in chains of love, firm as the throne of God above.' Lovely tune and only tuppence, miss."

"Do you have 'The Raven of San Jacinto'?" Sybil asked.

"I can get that, I can get it," the seller said. "And what's that then?"

"About the great battle in Texas, the great General?"

The ballad-seller arched his brows. His eyes were blue and crazily bright, with hunger, perhaps, or religion, or gin. "One of your Crimea generals then, a Frenchy, this Mr Jacinto?"

"No, no," Sybil said, and gave him a pitying smile, "General Houston, Sam Houston of Texas. I do want that song, most particular."

"I buy my publications fresh this afternoon, and I'll be sure to look for your song for you, miss."

"I shall want at least five copies for my friends," Sybil said.

"Tenpence will get you six."

"Six, then, and this afternoon, at this very spot."

"Just as you say, miss." The seller touched the brim of his hat.

Sybil walked away, into the crowd. She had done it. It was not so bad. She felt she could get used to it. Perhaps it was a good tune, too, one that people would enjoy when the ballad-man was forced to sell the copies.

Mick sidled up suddenly, at her elbow. "Not bad," he allowed, reaching into the pocket of his greatcoat, like magic, to produce an apple turnover, still hot, flaking sugar and wrapped in greasy paper.

"Thank you," she said, startled but glad, for she'd been thinking of stopping, hiding, fetching out the stolen shawl, but Mick's eyes had been on her every moment. She hadn't seen him, but he'd been watching; that was the way he was. She wouldn't forget again.

They walked, together and apart, all down Somerset Street, and then through the vast market of Petticoat Lane, lit as evening drew on with a host of lights, a glow of gas-mantles, the white glare of carbide, filthy grease-lamps, tallow dips twinkling among the food-stuffs proffered from the stalls. The hubbub was deafening here, but she delighted Mick by gulling three more ballad-sellers.

In a great bright Whitechapel gin-palace, with glittering gold-papered walls flaring with fishtail gas-jets, Sybil excused herself and found a ladies' convenience. There, safe within a reeking stall, she fetched the shawl out. So soft it was, and such a lovely violet colour too, one of the strange new dyes clever people made from coal. She folded the shawl neatly, and stuffed it through the top of her corset, so it rested safe. Then out to join her keeper again, finding him seated at a table. He'd bought her a noggin of honey gin. She sat beside him.

"You did well, girl," he said, and slid the little glass toward her. The place was full of Crimean soldiers on furlough, Irishmen, with street-drabs hanging on them, growing red-nosed and screechy on gin. No barmaids here, but big bruiser bully-rock bartenders, in white aprons, with mill-knocker clubs behind the bar.

"Gin's a whore's drink, Mick."

"Everybody likes gin," he said. "And you're no whore, Sybil."

"Dollymop, bobtail." She looked at him sharply. "What else d'ye call me, then?"

"You're with Dandy Mick now," he said. He leaned his chair back, jabbing his gloved thumbs through the armholes of his waistcoat. "You're an *adventuress*."

"Adventuress?"

"Bloody right." He straightened. "And here's to you." He sipped his gin-twist, rolled it over his tongue with an unhappy look, and swallowed. "Never mind, dear – they've cut this with turpentine or I'm a Jew." He stood up.

They left. She hung on his arm, trying to slow his pace. "'Adventurer,' that's what you are, then, eh, Mr Mick Radley?"

"So I am, Sybil," he said softly, "and you're to be my 'prentice. So you do as you're told in the proper humble spirit. Learn the tricks of craft. And someday you join the union, eh? The guild."

"Like my father, eh? You want to make a play of that, Mick? Who he was, who I am?"

"No," Mick said flatly. "He was old-fashioned, he's nobody now."



Sybil smirked. "They let us wicked girls into this fancy guild of yours, do they, Mick?"

"It's a knowledge guild," he said soberly. "The bosses, the big'uns, they can take all manner of things away from us. With their bloody laws and factories and courts and banks... They can make the world to their pleasure, they can take away your home and kin and even the work you do..." Mick shrugged angrily, his lean shoulders denting the heavy fabric of the greatcoat. "And even rob a hero's daughter of her virtue, if I'm not too bold in speaking of it." He pressed her hand against his sleeve, a hard, trapping grip. "But they can't ever take what you know, now can they, Sybil? They can't ever take that."

Sybil heard Hetty's footsteps in the hall outside her room, and the rattle of Hetty's key at the door. She let the serenette die down, with a high-pitched drone.

Hetty tugged the snow-flaked woollen bonnet from her head, shrugged free from her Navy cloak. She was another of Mrs Winterhalter's girls, a big-boned, raucous brunette from Devon, who drank too much, but was sweet in her way, and always kind to Toby the cat.

Sybil folded away the china-handled crank and lowered the scratched top of the cheap serenette. "I was practising. Mrs Winterhalter wants me to sing next Thursday."

"Bother Mrs. Winterhalter," said Hetty. "I thought this was your night out with your Mr C. Sybil. Or is it Mr K?" Hetty stamped warmth into her feet before the narrow little hearth, then noticed, in the lamp-light, the scattering of shoes and hat-boxes from Aaron & Son. "Oh my word," she said, and smiled, her broad mouth pinched a bit with envy. "A new beau, is it? You're so lucky, Sybil Jones!"

"Maybe," Sybil said. She sipped hot lemon cordial, tilting her head back to relax her throat.

Hetty winked. "Winterhalter doesn't know about this one, eh?"

Sybil shook her head and smiled. Hetty would not tell. "D'ye know anything about Texas, Hetty?"

"A country in America," Hetty said readily. "French own it, don't they."

"That's Mexico. Would you like to go to a kinotrope show, Hetty? The former President of Texas is lecturing. I've tickets, free for the taking."

"When?"

"Saturday."

"I'm dancing then," Hetty said. "Perhaps Mandy would go." She blew warmth into her fingers. "Friend of mine comes by late tonight, wouldn't trouble you, would it?"

"No," Sybil said. Mrs Winterhalter had a strict rule against any girl keeping company with men in her room. It was a rule Hetty often ignored, as if daring the landlord to peach on her. Since Mrs Winterhalter chose to pay the rent directly to the landlord, Mr Cairns, Sybil seldom had call to speak to him, and less with his sullen wife, a thick-ankled woman with a taste for dreadful hats. Cairns and his wife had never informed against Hetty, though Sybil was not sure why, for Hetty's room was next to theirs, and Hetty made a shameless racket when she brought men home – foreign diplomats, mostly, men with odd accents and, to judge by the noise, beastly habits.

"You can carry on singing if you like," Hetty said, and knelt before the ash-covered fire. "You've a fine voice, mustn't let your gifts go to waste." She began to feed individual coals into the hearth, shivering. A dire chill seemed to enter the room then, through the cracked casement of one of the nailed-up windows, and for a strange passing moment Sybil felt a distinct presence in the air. A definite sense of observation, of eyes fixed upon her from another realm. She thought of her dead father. *Learn the voice, Sybil, learn to speak, it's all we have that can fight them*, he had told her. This in the last few days before his arrest, when it was clear that the Rads had won again – clear to everyone, perhaps, save Walter Gerard. She had seen then, with heart-crushing clarity, the utter magnitude of her father's defeat. His ideals would be lost – not just misplaced but utterly expunged from history, crushed again and again and again, like the carcass of a mongrel dog under the racketing wheels of an express train. *Learn to speak, Sybil, it's all we have...*

"Will you read aloud tonight?" Hetty asked. "I'll make tea."

"Very well." In her spotty, scattered life with Hetty, reading aloud was one of the little rituals they had which passed for domesticity. Sybil took up the day's *Illustrated London News* from the deal table, settled her crinoline about her in the creaking, damp-smelling armchair, and squinted at a front-page article. It concerned itself with dinosaurs.

The Rads were quite mad for these dinosaurs, it seemed. Here was an engraving of a party of seven, led by Lord Darwin, all peering intently at some indeterminate object embedded in a coal-face in Thuringia. Sybil read the caption aloud, showed the picture to Hetty. A bone. The thing in the coal was a monstrous bone, as long as a man was tall. She shuddered. Turning the page, she encountered an artist's view of the creature as it might have looked in life, a monstrosity with twin rows of angry triangular sawteeth along its humped spine. It seemed the size of an elephant at least, though its evil little head was scarcely larger than a hound's.

Hetty poured the tea. "'Reptiles held sway across the whole of the earth,' eh?" she quoted, and threaded her needle. "I don't believe a bloody word of it."

"Why not?"

"They're the bones of bloody giants, out of Genesis. That's what the clergy say, ain't it?"

Sybil said nothing. Neither supposition struck her as the more fantastic. She turned to a second article, this one in praise of Her Majesty's Artillery in the Crimea. She found an engraving of two handsome subalterns admiring the operation of a long-range gun. The gun itself, its barrel stout as a foundry stack, looked fit to make short work of all Lord Darwin's dinosaurs. Sybil's attention, however, was held by an inset view of the gunnery Engine. The intricate nest of interlocking gearwork possessed a queer beauty, like some kind of baroque fabulous wallpaper.

"Have you anything that needs darning?" Hetty said.

"No, thank you."

"Read some adverts, then," Hetty advised, "I do hate that war humbug."

There was HAVILAND CHINA, from Limoges,

France; VIN MARIANI, the French tonic, with a testimonial from Alexandre Dumas and Descriptive Book, Portraits and Autographs of Celebrities, upon application to the premises in Oxford Street; SILVER ELECTRO SILICON POLISH, it never scratches, never wears, it is unlike others; the "NEW DEPARTURE" BICYCLE BELL, it has a tone all its own; DR BAYLEY'S LITHIA WATER, cures Bright's disease and the gouty diathesis; GURNEY'S "REGENT" POCKET STEAM ENGINE, intended for use with domestic sewing machines. This last held Sybil's attention, but not through its promise to operate a machine at double the old speed at a cost of one halfpenny per hour.

Here was an engraving of the tastefully ornamented little boiler, to be heated by gas or paraffin. Charles Egremont had purchased one of these for his wife. It came equipped with a rubber tube intended to vent the waste steam when jammed under a convenient sash window, but Sybil had been delighted to hear that it had turned Madame's drawing-room into a Turkish bath.

When the paper was finished, Sybil went to bed. She was woken around midnight by the savage rhythmic crunching of Hetty's bedsprings.

It was dim in the Garrick Theatre, dusty and cold, with the pit and the balcony and the ranks of shabby seats; but it was pitch-dark below the stage, where Mick Radley was, and it smelled of damp and lime.

Mick's voice echoed up from under her feet. "Ever seen the innards of a kinotrope, Sybil?"

"I saw one once, backstage," she said. "At a music hall, in Bethnal Green. I knew the fellow what worked it, a clacker cove."

"A sweetheart?" Mick asked. His echoing voice was sharp.

"No," Sybil told him quickly, "I was singing a bit... But it scarcely paid."

She heard the sharp click of his repeating match. It caught on the third attempt and he lit a stub of candle. "Come down," he commanded. "Don't stand there like a goose, showing off your ankles." Sybil lifted her crinoline with both hands and picked her way uneasily down the steep damp stairs.

Mick reached up to grope behind a tall stage mirror, a great gleaming sheet of silvered glass, with a wheeled pedestal and oily gears and worn wooden cranks. He retrieved a cheap black portmanteau of proofed canvas, placed it carefully on the floor before him, and squatted to undo the flimsy tin clasps. He removed a stack of perforated cards bound with a ribbon of red paper. There were other bundles in the bag as well, Sybil saw, and something else, a gleam of polished wood.

He handled the cards gently, like a Bible.

"Safe as houses," he said. "You just disguise 'em, you see – write something stupid on the wrapper, like 'Temperance Lecture – Parts One Two Three.' Then coves never think to steal 'em, or even load them up and look." Hefting the thick block, he riffled its edge with his thumb, so that it made a sharp crisp sound, like a gambler's new deck. "I put a deal of capital in these," he said. "Weeks of work from the best kino hands in Manchester. Exclusively to my design, I might point out. 'Tis a lovely thing, girl. Quite artistic,

in its way. You'll soon see."

Closing the portmanteau, he stood. He carefully slid the bundle of cards into his coat-pocket, then bent over a crate and tugged out a thick glass tube. He blew dust from the tube, then gripped one end of it with a special pair of pincers. The glass cracked open with an airtight pop – there was a fresh block of lime in the tube. Mick slid it loose, humming to himself. He tamped the lime gently into the socket of a limelight burner, a great dish-shaped thing of sooty iron and gleaming tin. Then he turned a hose-tap, sniffed a bit, nodded, turned a second tap, and set the candle to it.

Sybil yelped as a vicious flash sheeted into her eyes. Mick chuckled at her over the hiss of blazing gas, dots of hot blue dazzle drifting before her. "Better," he remarked. He aimed the blazing limelight carefully into the stage-mirror, then began to adjust its cranks.

Sybil looked around, blinking. It was dank and ratty and cramped under the Garrick stage, the sort of place a dog or a pauper might die in, with torn and yellowed bills underfoot, for naughty farces like "That Rascal Jack" and "Scamps of London." A pair of ladies' unmentionables were wadded in a corner. From her brief unhappy days as a stage-singer, she had some idea how they might have got there.

She let her gaze follow steam-pipes and taut wires to the gleam of the Babbage Engine, a small one, a kinotrope model, no taller than Sybil herself. Unlike everything else in the Garrick, the Engine looked in very good repair, mounted on four mahogany blocks. The floor and ceiling above and beneath it had been carefully scoured and whitewashed. Steam calculators were delicate things, temperamental, so she'd heard; better not to own one than not cherish it. In the stray glare from Mick's limelight, dozens of knobbed brass columns gleamed, set top and bottom into solid sockets bored through polished plates, with shining levers, ratchets, a thousand steel gears cut bright and fine. It smelled of linseed oil.

Looking at it, this close, this long, made Sybil feel quite odd. Hungry almost, or greedy in a queer way, the way she might feel about... a fine lovely horse, say. She wanted – not to own it exactly, but possess it somehow...

Mick took her elbow suddenly, from behind. She started. "Lovely thing, isn't it?" "Yes, it's... lovely."

Mick still held her arm. Slowly, he put his other gloved hand against her cheek, inside her bonnet. Then he lifted her chin with his thumb, staring into her face. "It makes you feel something, doesn't it?"

His rapt voice frightened her, his eyes underlit with glare. "Yes, Mick," she said obediently, quickly. "I do feel it... something."

He tugged her bonnet loose, to hang at her neck. "You're not frightened of it, Sybil, are you? Not with Dandy Mick here, holding you. You feel a little special frisson. You'll learn to like that feeling. We'll make a clacker of you."

"Can I do that, truly? Can a girl do that?"

Mick laughed. "Have you never heard of Lady Ada Byron, then? The Prime Minister's daughter, and the very Queen of Engines!" He let her go, and swung both his arms wide, coat swinging open, a showman's gesture. "Ada Byron, true friend and disciple of Bab-

bage himself! Lord Charles Babbage, father of the Difference Engine and the Newton of our modern age!"

She gaped at him. "But Ada Byron is a ladyship!"

"You'd be surprised who our Lady Ada knows," Mick declared, plucking a block of cards from his pocket and peeling off its paper jacket. "Oh, not to drink tea with, among the diamond squad at her garden parties, but Ada's what you'd call fast, in her own mathematical way..." He paused. "That's not to say that Ada is the best, you know. I know clackers in the Steam Intellect Society that make even Lady Ada look a bit tardy. But Ada possesses genius. D'ye know what that means, Sybil? To possess genius?"

"What?" Sybil said, hating the giddy surety in his voice.

"D'ye know how analytical geometry was born? Fellow named Descartes, watching a fly on the ceiling. A million fellows before him had watched flies on the ceiling, but it took René Descartes to make a science of it. Now engineers use what he discovered every day, but if it weren't for him we'd still be blind to it."

"What do flies matter to anyone?" Sybil demanded.

"Ada had an insight once that ranked with Descartes' discovery. No one has found a use for it as yet. It's what they call pure mathematics." Mick laughed. "'Pure.' You know what that means, Sybil? It means they can't get it to run." He rubbed his hands together, grinning. "No one can get it to run."

Mick's glee was wearing at her nerves. "I thought you hated lordships!"

"I do hate lordly privilege, what's not earned fair and square and level," he said. "But Lady Ada lives and swears by the power of grey matter, and not her blue blood." He slotted the cards into a silvered tray by the side of the machine, then spun and caught her wrist. "Your father's dead, girl! 'Tis not that I mean to hurt you, saying it, but the Luddites are dead as cold ashes. Oh, we marched and ranted, for the rights of labour and such – fine talk, girl! But Lord Charles Babbage made blueprints while we made pamphlets. And his blueprints built this world."

Mick shook his head. "The Byron men, the Babbage men, the Industrial Radicals, they own Great Britain! They own us, girl – the very globe is at their feet, Europe, America, everywhere. The House of Lords is packed from top to bottom with Rads. Queen Victoria won't stir a finger without a nod from the savants and capitalists." He pointed at her. "And it's no use fighting that any more, and you know why? 'Cause the Rads do play fair, or fair enough to manage – and you can become one of 'em, if you're clever! You can't get clever men to fight such a system, as it makes too much sense to 'em."

Mick thumbed his chest. "But that don't mean that you and I are out in the cold and lonely. It only means we have to think faster, with our eyes peeled and our ears open..." Mick struck a prize-fighter's pose: elbows bent, fists poised, knuckles up before his face. Then he flung his hair back, and grinned at her.

"That's all very well for you," Sybil protested, "you can do as you like. You were one of my father's followers – well, there were many such, and some are in Parliament now. But fallen women get ruined, d'ye see? Ruined, and stay that way."

Mick straightened, frowning at her. "Now that's

exactly what I mean. You're running with the flash mob, now, but thinking like a trollop! There's no one knows who you are, in Paris! The cops and bosses have your number here, true enough! But numbers are only that, and your file's no more than a simple stack of cards. For them as know, there's ways to change a number." He sneered, to see her surprise. "It ain't done easy, here in London, I grant you. But affairs run differently, in the Paris of Louis Napoleon! Affairs run fast and loose in flash Patee, especially for an adventuress with a blarney tongue and a pretty ankle."

Sybil bit her knuckle. Her eyes burned suddenly. It was acrid smoke from the limelight, and fear. A new number in the government's machines – that would mean a new life. A life without a past. The unexpected thought of such freedom terrified her. Not so much for what it meant in itself, though that was strange and dazzling enough. But for what Mick Radley might demand for such a thing, in fair exchange. "Truly, you could change my number?"

"I can buy you a new one in Paris. Pass you off for French or an American refugee girl." Mick folded his elegant arms. "I promise nothing, mind you. You'll have to earn it."

"You wouldn't gull me, Mick?" she said slowly. "Because... Because I could be really and specially sweet to a fellow, who could do me such a great service."

Mick jammed his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels, looking at her. "Could you now," he said softly. Her trembling words had fanned something inside him, she could see it in his eyes. An eager, lustful kindling, something she dimly knew was there, a need he had, to... slip his fishhooks deeper into her.

"I could, if you treated me fair and level, as your 'prentice adventuress, and not some cakey dollymop, to gull and cast aside." Sybil felt tears coming, harder this time. She blinked, and looked up boldly, and let them flow, thinking perhaps they might do some good. "You wouldn't raise my hopes and dash them, would you? That would be low and cruel! If you did that I'd – I'd jump off Tower Bridge!"

He looked her in the eye. "Bar that sniffing, girl, and listen close to me. Understand this. You're not just Mick's pretty bit o' muslin – I may have a taste for that same as any man, but I can get that where I like, and don't need you just for that. I need the blarney skill and the daring pluck that was Mr Walter Gerard's. You're to be my 'prentice, Sybil, and I your master, and let that be how things stand with us. You'll be loyal, obedient, truthful to me, no subterfuge and no impertinence, and in return, I'll teach you craft, and keep you well – and you'll find me as kind and generous as you are loyal and true. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mick."

"We have a pact, then?"

"Yes, Mick." She smiled at him.

"Well and good," he said. "Then kneel, here, and put your hands together, so" – he joined his hands in prayer – "and make this oath. That you, Sybil Gerard, do swear by saints and angels, by powers, dominions and thrones, by seraphim and cherubim and the all-seeing eye, to obey Michael Radley, and serve him

faithfully, so help you God! Do you so swear?"

She stared at him in dismay. "Must I really?"

"Yes."

"But isn't it a great sin, to make such an oath, to a man who...I mean to say...We're not in holy wedlock..."

"That's a marriage vow," he said impatiently, "and this a 'prentice oath!"

She saw no alternative. Tugging her skirts back, she knelt before him on cold gritty stone.

"Do you so swear?"

"I do, so help me God."

"Don't look so glum," he said, helping her to her feet, "that's a mild and womanly oath you swore, compared to some." He pulled her to her feet. "Let it brace you, should you have doubts or disloyal thoughts. Now take this," he handed her the guttering candle, "and hunt up that gin-soak of a stage-manager, and tell him I want the boilers fired."

They dined that evening in the Argyll Rooms, a Haymarket resort not far from Laurent's Dancing Academy. The Argyll had private supper rooms in which the indiscreet might spend an entire night.

Sybil was mystified by the choice of a private room. Mick was certainly not ashamed to be seen with her in public. Midway through the lamb, however, the waiter admitted a stout little gentleman with pomaded red hair and a gold chain across a taut velvet waistcoat. He was round and plush as a child's doll.

"Hullo, Corny," Mick said, without bothering to put down his knife and fork.

"Evening, Mick," the man said, with the curiously unplaceable accent of an actor, or a provincial long in service to city gentry. "I was told you'd need of me."

"And told correctly, Corny." Mick neither offered to introduce Sybil nor asked the man to sit. She began to feel quite uncomfortable. "Tis a brief part, so you should have little trouble remembering your lines." Mick produced a plain envelope from his coat and handed it to the man. "Your lines, your cue, and your retainer. The Garrick, Saturday night."

The man smiled mirthlessly as he accepted the envelope. "Quite some time since I played the Garrick, Mick." He winked at Sybil and took his leave with no more formality than that.

"Who's that, Mick?" Sybil asked. Mick had returned to his lamb and was spooning mint sauce from a pewter serving-pot.

"An actor of parts," Mick said. "He'll play opposite you in the Garrick, during Houston's speech."

Sybil was baffled. "Play? Opposite me?"

"You're a 'prentice adventuress, don't forget. You can expect to be called on to play many roles, Sybil. A political speech can always benefit from a bit of sweetening."

"Sweetening?"

"Never mind." He seemed to lose interest in his lamb, and pushed his plate aside. "Plenty of time for rehearsal tomorrow. I've something to show you now." He rose from the table, crossed to the door, and bolted it securely. Returning, he lifted the proofed canvas portmanteau from the carpet beside his chair and placed it before her on the Argyll's clean but much mended linen.



She'd been curious about the portmanteau. Not curious that he'd carried it with him, from the Garrick's pit, first to the printers, to examine the handbills for Houston's lecture, then on to the Argyll Rooms, but because it was of such cheap stuff, nothing at all like the gear he so obviously prided himself on. Why should Dandy Mick choose to carry about a bag of that sort, when he could afford some flash confection from Aaron's, nickel clasps and silk woven in Ada chequers? And she knew that the black bag no longer contained the kino cards for the lecture, because he'd wrapped those carefully in sheets of *The Times* and hidden them again behind the stage mirror.

Mick undid the wretched tin clasps, opened the bag, and lifted out a long narrow case of polished rosewood, its corners trimmed with bright brass. Sybil wondered if it mightn't contain a telescope, for she'd seen boxes of this sort in the window of a firm of Oxford Street instrument-makers. Mick handled it with a caution that was very nearly comical, like some Papist called upon to move the dust of a dead Pope. Caught up in a sudden mood of childlike anticipation, she forgot the man called Corny and Mick's worrying talk about playing opposite him at the Garrick. There was something of the magician about Mick now, as he placed the gleaming rosewood case on the tablecloth. She almost expected him to furl back his cuffs: nothing here, you see, nothing here.

His thumbs swung tiny brass hooks from a pair of miniature eyelets. He paused for effect.

Sybil found that she was holding her breath. Had he brought a gift for her? Some token of her new status? Something to secretly mark her as his 'prentice adventuress?

Mick lifted the rosewood lid, with its sharp brass corners.

It was filled with playing cards. Stuffed end to end with them, a score of decks at the least. Sybil's heart fell.

"You've seen nothing like this before," he said, "I can assure you of that."

Mick pinched out the card nearest his right hand and displayed it for her. No, not a playing card, though near enough in size. It was made of some strange milky substance that was neither paper nor glass, very thin and glossy. Mick flexed it lightly between thumb and forefinger. It bent easily, but sprang rigid again as he released it.

It was perforated with perhaps a dozen tightly spaced rows of circular holes, holes no larger than those in a good pearl button. Three of its corners were slightly rounded, while the fourth was trimmed off at an angle. Near the trimmed corner, someone had written "No.1" in faint mauve ink.

"Camphorated cellulose," Mick declared, "the devil's own stuff if it should touch fire, but nothing else will do for the finer functions of the Napoleon."

Napoleon? Sybil was lost. "Is it a sort of kino card, Mick?"

He beamed at her, delighted. She seemed to have said the right thing.

"Have you never heard of the Great Napoleon Ordinateur, the mightiest Engine of the French Academy? The London police Engines are mere toys beside it."

Sybil pretended to study the contents of the box,

knowing it would please Mick. But it was merely a wooden box, quite handsomely made, lined with the green baize that covered billiard tables. It contained a very large quantity of the slick milky cards, perhaps several hundred.

"Tell me what this is about, Mick."

He laughed, quite happily it seemed, and bent suddenly to kiss her mouth.

"In time, in time." He straightened, reinserted the card, lowered the lid, clicked the brass hooks into place. "Every brotherhood has its mysteries. Dandy Mick's best guess is that nobody knows quite what it would mean to run this little stack. It would demonstrate a certain matter, prove a certain nested series of mathematical hypotheses...All matters quite arcane. And by the by, it would make the name of Michael Radley shine like the very heavens in the clacking confraternity." He winked. "The French clackers have their own brotherhoods, you know. Les Fils de Vaucanson, they call themselves. The Jacquardine Society. We'll be showing those onion-eaters a thing or two."

He seemed drunk to her, now, though she knew he'd only had those two bottled ales. No, he was intoxicated by the idea of the cards in the box, whatever they might be.

"This box and its contents are quite extraordinarily dear, Sybil." He seated himself again and rummaged in the cheap black bag. It yielded a folded sheet of stout brown paper, an ordinary pair of stationery shears, a roll of strong green twine. As Mick spoke, he unfolded the paper and began to wrap the box in it. "Very dear. Travelling with the General exposes a man to certain dangers. We're off to Paris after the lecture, but tomorrow morning you'll be taking this round to the Post Office in Great Portland Street." Done with wrapping, he wound twine about the paper. "Nip this for me with the shears." She did as he asked. "Now put your finger here." He executed a perfect knot. "You'll be mailing our parcel to Paris. *Poste restante*. Do you know what that means?"

"It means the parcel is held for the addressee."

Mick nodded, took a stick of scarlet sealing wax from one trouser pocket, his repeating match from the other. The match struck on the first try. "Yes, held there in Paris for us, safe as houses." The wax darkened and slid in the oily flame. Scarlet droplets splattered the green knot, the brown paper. He tossed the shears and the roll of twine back into the portmanteau, pocketed wax and match, withdrew his reservoir-pen, and began to address the parcel.

"But what is it, Mick? How can you know its value if you've no idea what it does?"

"Now I didn't say that, did I? I've my ideas, don't I? Dandy Mick always has his ideas. I'd enough of an idea to take the original up to Manchester with me, on the General's business. I'd enough of an idea to pump the canniest clackers for their latest compression techniques, and enough of the General's capital to commission the result on Napoleon-gauge cellulose!"

It might have been Greek, for all it meant to her.

Hours later, she woke in Grand's, in bed beside him, to the click of his match and the sweet reek of his cigar. He'd had her twice, on the chaise longue behind their table in the Argyll Rooms,

and once again in Grand's. She'd not known him to be so ardent before. She'd found it encouraging, though the third go had made her sore, down there.

The room was dark, save for the spill of gaslight past the curtains.

She moved a bit closer to him.

"Where would you like to go, Sybil, after France?"

She'd never considered the question. "With you, Mick..."

He chuckled, and slid his hand beneath the bedclothes, his fingers closing around the mound of her womanhood.

"Where shall we go then, Mick?"

"Go with me and you'll go first to Mexico. Then north, for the liberation of Texas, with a Franco-Mexican army under the command of General Houston."

"But... But isn't Texas a frightfully queer place?"

"Stop thinking like a Whitechapel drab. All the world's queer, seen from Piccadilly. Sam Houston had himself a bloody palace, in Texas. Before the Texians threw him into exile, he was Britain's greatest ally in the American west. You and I, why, we could live like grandees in Texas, build a manor by some river..."

"Would they truly let us do that, Mick?"

"Her Majesty's Government, you mean? Perfidious Albion?" Mick chuckled. "Well, that largely depends on British public opinion toward General Houston! We're doing all we can to sweeten his reputation here in Britain. That's why he's on this lecture tour, isn't it."

"I see," Sybil said. "You're very clever, Mick."

"Deep matters, Sybil! Balance of power. It worked for Britain in Europe for five hundred years, and it works even better in America. Union, Confederacy, Republics of Texas and California – they all take a turn in British favour, until they get too bold, a bit too independent, and then they're taken down a peg. Divide and rule, dear." The coal-end of Mick's cigar glowed in the darkness. "If it weren't for British diplomacy, British power, America might be all one huge nation."

"What about your friend the General? Will he truly help us?"

"That's the beauty of it!" Mick declared. "The diplomats thought Sam Houston was a bit stiff-necked, didn't care for some of his actions and policies, didn't back him as strongly they should have. But the Texian junta that replaced him is far worse. They're openly hostile to British interests! Their days are numbered. The General has had to cool his heels a bit in exile here in England, but now he's on his way back to Texas, for what's his by right." He shrugged. "Should have happened years ago. Our trouble is that Her Majesty's Government don't know its own mind! There's factions among 'em. Some don't trust Sam Houston – but the French will help us anyhow! Their Mexican clients have a border war with the Texians. They need the General!"

"You're going to war, then, Mick?" She found it difficult to imagine Dandy Mick leading a cavalry charge.

"*Coup d'etat*, more like," he assured her. "We won't see much bloodshed. I'm Houston's political man, you see, and his man I'll stay, for I'm the one's arranged this London speaking-tour and on to France,

and I'm the one's made certain approaches as resulted in him being granted his audience with the French Emperor..." But could that be true, really? "And I'm the one as runs Manchester's newest and best through the kino for him, sweetens the press and British public opinion, hires the bill-stickers..." He drew on his cigar, his fingers kneading her there, and she heard him puff out a great satisfied cloud of cherry smoke.

But he mustn't have felt like doing it again, not then, because she was soon asleep and dreaming, dreaming of Texas, a Texas of rolling downs, contented sheep, the windows of grey manors glinting in late afternoon sunlight.

Sybil sat in an aisle seat, in the third row back in the Garrick, thinking unhappily that General Sam Houston, late of Texas, was not drawing much of a crowd. People were filtering in as the five-man orchestra squeaked and sawed and honked. A family party was settling in the row before her, two boys in blue jackets and trousers, with laid-down shirt collars, a little girl in a shawl and a braided frock, then two more little girls, ushered in by their governess, a thin-looking sort with a hooked nose and watery eyes, sniffing into her handkerchief. Then the oldest boy, sauntering in, a sneer on his face. Then papa with dress-coat and cane and whiskers, and fat mama with long ringlets and a big nasty hat and three gold rings on her plump fingers. Finally all were seated, amid a shuffling of coats and shawls and a munching of candied orange peel, quite patently well-behaved and expecting improvement. Clean and soaped and prosperous, in their snug machine-made clothes.

A clerky fellow with spectacles took the next seat to Sybil's, an inch-wide blue strip showing at his hairline, where he'd shaved his forehead to suggest intellect. He was reading Mick's programme and sucking an acidulated lemon drop. And past him a trio of officers, on leave from the Crimea, looking very pleased with themselves, come to hear about an old-fashioned war in Texas, fought the old-fashioned way. There were other soldiers speckled through the crowd, bright in their red coats, the respectable sort, who didn't go for drabs and gin, but would take the Queen's pay, and learn gunnery and arithmetic, and come back to work in the railroads and shipyards, and better themselves.

The place was full of bettering-blokes, really: shopkeepers and store clerks and pharmacists, with their tidy wives and broods. In her father's day, such people, Whitechapel people, had been angry and lean and shabby, with sticks in their hands, and dirks in their belts. But times had changed under the Rads, and now even Whitechapel had its tight-laced scrub-faced woman and its cakey clock-watching men, who read the *Dictionary of Useful Knowledge* and the *Journal of Moral Improvement* and looked to get ahead.

Then the gaslights guttered in their copper rings, and the orchestra swung into a flat rendition of "Come to the Bower." With a huff, the limelight flared, the curtain drew back before the kinetrope screen, the music covering the clicking of kino-bits spinning themselves into place. Broken frills and furbelows grew like black frost on the edges of the screen. They framed tall letters, in a fancy alphabet of sharp-edged Engine-Gothic, black against white:

EDITIONS
PANOPTIQUE
PRESENTS

And below the kinotrope, Houston entered stage-left, a bulky, shabby figure, limping toward the podium at the centre of the stage. He was drowned in dimness for the moment, below the raw and focused glare of Mick's limelight.

Sybil watched him closely, curious about him, wary – her first glimpse of Mick's employer. She'd seen enough American refugees in London to have ideas about them. The Unionists dressed much like normal Britons, if they had the money for it, while Confederates tended to dress rather gaudy and flash, but peculiar, not quite proper; to judge by Houston, the Texians were an even queerer and madder lot. He was a big man, red-faced and beefy, over six feet tall in his heavy boots, his broad shoulders draped in a long coarse-woven blanket rather like a mantelet, but barbarically striped. Red and black and umber, it swept the Garrick's stage like a tragedian's toga. He had a thick mahogany cane in his right hand, and he swung it lightly now, as if he didn't need it, but his legs shook, Sybil saw, and the gold fringe trembled on the fancy seams of his trousers.

Now he mounted to the darkened podium, wiped his nose, sipped at a glass of something that plainly wasn't water. Above his head the kinotrope shuffled into a coloured image, the lion of Great Britain and a sort of long-horned bull. The animals fraternized beneath small crossed banners, the Union Jack and the single-starred flag of Texas, both bright in red and white and blue. Houston was adjusting something behind his podium; a small stage-mirror, Sybil guessed, so he could check the kinotrope behind him as he spoke, and not lose his place.

The kinotrope went to black and white again, the screen's bits flickering, row by row, like falling dominoes. A portrait-bust appeared in shaded jagged lines: high balding forehead, then heavy brows, thick nose bracketed by bristling cheek-whiskers that hid the ears. The thin mouth was set firmly, the cleft chin upraised. Then, below the bust, the words GENERAL SAM HOUSTON.

A second limelight flared, catching Houston at the podium, flinging him into sudden bright relief before the audience. Sybil clapped hard. She was the last to finish.

"Thank you very kindly, ladies and gentlemen of London," Houston said. He had the deep booming voice of a practised orator, marred by a foreign drawl. "You do a stranger great honour." Houston looked across the seats of the Garrick. "I see we have many gentlemen of Her Majesty's military in the audience tonight." He shrugged the blanket back a bit and limelight glittered harshly from the medals clinging to his coat. "Your professional interest is very gratifying, sirs."

In the row before Sybil, the children were fidgeting. A little girl squealed in pain as one of her brothers punched her. "And I see we have a future British fighter here, as well!" There was a ripple of surprised laughter. Houston checked his mirror quickly, then leaned over his podium, his heavy brows knitting in grandfatherly charm. "What's your name, son?"

The wicked boy sat bolt upright. "Billy, sir," he squeaked. "Billy... William Greenacre, sir."

Houston nodded gravely. "Tell me, Master Greenacre, would you like to run away from home, and live with Red Indians?"

"Oh yes sir," the boy blurted, and then "oh, no sir!" The audience laughed again.

"When I was about your age, young William, I was a lad of spirit, like yourself. And that was the very course of action I pursued." The kino shuffled behind the General's head, and a coloured map appeared, outlines of the various states of America, oddly-shaped provinces with confusing names. Houston checked his mirror and spoke rapidly. "I was born in the American state of Tennessee. My family was of the Scottish gentry, though times were hard for us, on our little frontier farm. And though I was born an American, I felt little allegiance to the Yankee government in far Washington." The kinotrope displayed the portrait of an American savage, a mad-eyed staring creature hung with feathers, cheeks streaked with kino-blocks of warpaint. "Just across the river," Houston said, "lived the mighty nation of the Cherokee, a simple folk of natural nobility. I found this suited me far better than a life with my American neighbours. Alas, for their souls were pinched by the greed for dollars."

Houston shook his head a bit before his British audience, pained at his own allusion to an American national failing. He had their sympathy, Sybil thought. "The Cherokees won my heart," Houston continued, "and I ran from home to join them, with nothing, ladies and gentlemen, but the buckskin coat on my back, and Homer's noble tale of the *Iliad* in my pocket." The kinotrope shuffled itself bottom-to-top, producing an image from a Grecian urn, a warrior with a crested helmet, his spear upraised. He bore a round shield with the emblem of a raven, wings outspread. There was a light pattering of impressed applause, which Houston accepted, nodding modestly, as if it were meant for him.

"As a child of the American frontier," he said, "I can't claim to have had much fine schooling, although in later life I passed the bar and led a nation. As a youth, however, I sought my education in an ancient school. I committed every line of the blind bard's book to memory." He lifted the medal-strewn lapel of his coat, left-handed. "The heart within this scarred breast," he said, and thumped it, "still stirs to that noblest of stories, with its tales of valour to challenge the very gods, and of unstained martial honour that endures...till death!" He waited for applause. At length it came, though not as warmly as he seemed to expect.

"I saw no contradiction in the lives of Homer's heroes and those of my beloved Cherokees," Houston persisted. Behind him the Greek's javelin sprouted the dangling feathers of a hunting-spear, and warpaint daubed his face.

Houston peered at his notes. "Together we hunted bear and deer and boar, fished the limpid stream and raised the yellow corn. Around the campfire, under open skies, I told my savage brothers of the moral lessons that my youthful heart had gleaned from Homer's words. Because of this, they gave me the red man's name of Raven, after the feathered spirit that

they deem the wisest of birds."

The Greek dissolved, giving way to a grander raven, its wings spread stiffly across the screen, its chest covered by a striped shield. Sybil recognized it. It was the American eagle, symbol of the sundered Union, but the white-headed Yankee bird had become Houston's black crow. It was *cléver*, she decided, perhaps more clever than it was worth, for two of the kinotrope bits in the screen's upper-left-corner had jammed on their spindles, showing dots of leftover blue; a tiny fault but annoying all out of proportion, like a bit of dust in one's eye. Mick's fancy clacking was working the Garrick's kino very hard.

Distracted, Sybil had lost the thread of Houston's speech. "...the brazen cry of the battle-trumpet, in the camp of the Tennessee volunteers." Another kino-portrait appeared: a man who looked rather like Houston, but with a tall shock of hair in front, and hollow cheeks, identified by caption as GEN. ANDREW JACKSON.

There was a hiss of breath here and there, led by the soldiers perhaps, and the crowd stirred. Some Britons still remembered "Hickory" Jackson, without fondness. To hear Houston tell it, Jackson had also bravely fought against Indians, and even been President of America for a time; but all that meant little here. Houston praised Jackson as his patron and mentor, "an honest soldier of the people, who valued a man's true inner worth above the tinsel of wealth or show," but the applause for this sentiment was grudging at best.

Now another scene appeared, some kind of rude frontier fort. Houston narrated a tale of siege, from his early military career, when he'd fought a campaign under Jackson against the Creek Indians. But he seemed to have lost his natural audience, the soldiers, for the three Crimea veterans in Sybil's row were still muttering angrily about Hickory Jackson. "The damned war was over before New Orleans..."

Suddenly the limelight flashed blood-red. Mick was busy beneath the stage: a tinted glass filter, the sudden booming of a kettle-drum, as little kino cannons cracked gunpowder-white around the fort, and single-bit flickers of red cannon-shell arched rapidly across the screen. "Night after night we heard the Creek fanatics howling their eerie death-songs," Houston shouted, a pillar of glare beneath the screen. "The situation demanded a direct assault, with cold steel! It was said to be certain death to charge that gate...But I was not a Tennessee Volunteer for nothing..."

A tiny figure dashed toward the fort, no more than a few black squares, a wriggling block of bits, and the entire stage went black. There was surprised applause in the sudden darkness. The penny-boys up in the Garrick's gallery whistled shrilly. Then limelight framed Houston again. He began to boast about his wounds; two bullets in the arm, a knife-stab in the leg, an arrow into his belly – Houston didn't say the vulgar word, but he did rub that area lingeringly, as if he were dyspeptic. He'd lain all night on the battlefield, he claimed, and then been hauled for days through wilderness, on a supply cart, bleeding, raving, sick with swamp-fever...

The clerky cove next to Sybil took another lemon-



drop, and looked at his pocket-watch. Now a five-pointed star appeared slowly amidst the funereal black of the screen, as Houston narrated his lingering escape from the grave. One of the jammed kino-bits had popped loose again, but another had jammed in the meantime, on the lower right.

Sybil stifled a yawn.

The star brightened slowly as Houston spoke about his entry into American politics, presenting as his motive the desire to help his persecuted pet Cherokees. This was exotic enough, Sybil thought, but at its heart lay the same snicky humbug politicians always talked, and the audience was growing restive. They would have liked more fighting, or perhaps more poetic talk about life with the Cherokees. Instead Houston had settled into a litany of his election to some rude equivalent of Parliament, various obscure posts in provincial government, and all the while the star grew slowly, its edges branching elaborately, becoming the emblem of the government of Tennessee.

Sybil's eyelids grew heavy, fluttered, while the General blustered on.

Quite suddenly, Houston's tone changed, becoming lingering, sentimental, a honeyed lilt creeping into his drawl. He was talking about a woman.

Sybil sat up straighter, listening.

Houston had been elected Governor, it seemed, and had got himself some tin, and been cheery about it. And he'd found himself a sweetheart, some Tennessee gentry girl, and married her.

But on the kino's screen, fingers of darkness crept in snake-like from the edges. They menaced the State Seal.

Governor and Mrs Houston had scarcely settled in when wifey kicked over the traces, and fled back to her family. She'd left him a letter, Houston said, a letter that contained an awful secret. A secret he had never revealed, and had sworn to carry to his grave. "A private matter, of which a gentleman of honour cannot and should not speak. Black disaster struck me..." The newspapers – apparently they did have newspapers in Tennessee – had attacked him. "The tattling mouths of libel poured their venom on me," Houston lamented, as the Greek shield with the raven appeared, and black kino-blobs – mud, Sybil supposed – began to spatter it.

Houston's revelations grew shocking. He'd actually gone through with it, had divorced his wife, of all the unlikely, awful things. Of course he'd lost his position in Government; outraged society had hounded him from office, and Sybil wondered why Houston had dared to mention such an ugly scandal. It was as if he expected his London audience to morally approve of a divorced man. Still, she noticed, the ladies seemed intrigued, and not entirely without sympathy perhaps. Even the fat mama fluttered at her double chins with a fan.

General Houston was a foreigner, after all, half a savage by his own account; but when he spoke of his wife it was tenderly, as of a true love, a love slain by some cruel mysterious truth. His bellowing voice broke with unashamed emotion; he mopped at his forehead a bit, with a fancy handkerchief from his leopard-skin vest.

In truth, he wasn't a bad-looking cove, over sixty

but that sort could be kinder to a girl. His confession seemed bold and manly, for he himself had brought the matter up: the divorce scandal and the secret letter from Mrs Houston. He wouldn't stop talking about it, but neither would he tell them the secret; he'd pricked the curiosity of his audience – and Sybil herself was simply dying to know.

She chided herself for being so cakey, for it was likely something stupid and simple, not half so deep and mysterious as he feigned. Likely his gentry-girl wasn't half so angelic as she'd looked. Likely she'd had her maiden virtue stolen from her by some good-looking Tennessee beau-trap, long before Raven Houston came along. Men had hard rules for their brides, if never for themselves.

Likely Houston had brought it all on himself. Perhaps he had beastly vile ideas about married life, come from living with savages. Or perhaps he'd milled his wife about with his fists – for Sybil fancied he'd be a right bully-rock, in his cups.

The kino came alive with harpies, meant to symbolize Houston's slanderers, those who'd smeared his precious honour with the ink of a gutter press. Nasty crooky-back things, crowding the screen in devilish black and red. As the screen whirled steadily, they twitched their cloven hooves. Never had she seen the like, some Manchester punch-card artist surely having got the gin-horrors... Now Houston was ranting about challenges and honour, by which he meant duelling, Americans being most famous duellists, who loved guns and shot each other at the drop of a hat... He'd have killed some of those newspaper rascals, Houston insisted loudly, if he hadn't been Governor, and on his dignity. So instead he'd thrown in his cards, and gone back to live with his precious Cherokees... He had a real head of steam up, now; he'd stoked himself so, it was almost frightening to watch. The audience was entertained, their reserve broken by his bulging eyes and veiny Texian neck, but none too far from disgust.

Maybe it had been something really dreadful that he'd done, Sybil thought, rubbing her hands together inside her rabbit-skin muff. Maybe it was lady's-fever, that he'd given his own wife a case of the glue. Some types of glue were horrible, and could make you mad, or blind, or crippled. Maybe that was the secret. Mick might know. Very likely Mick knew all about it.

Houston explained how he had left the United States in disgust, and gone to Texas, and at the word a map appeared, a sprawl of land in the middle of the continent. Houston claimed that he'd gone there seeking land for his poor suffering Cherokee Indians, but it was all a bit confusing.

Sybil asked the clerky fellow next to her for the time. Only an hour had passed. The speech was a third gone. Her moment was coming.

"You must envision a nation many times the size of your home islands," said Houston, "with no roads greater than the grassy tracks of Indians. Without, at that time, a single mile of British railroad, and lacking the telegraph, or, indeed, Engine resources of any kind. As commander-in-chief of the Texian national forces, my orders had no courier more swift or more reliable than the mounted scout, his way menaced by the Comanche and Karankawa, by Mexican raiding-

parties, and by the thousand nameless hazards of the wilderness. Small wonder then that Colonel Travis should receive my orders too late; and place his confidence, tragically, in the reinforcing-party led by Colonel Fannin. Surrounded by an enemy force fifty times his own, Colonel Travis declared his objective to be Victory or Death – knowing full well that the latter was a surely fated outcome. The defenders of the Alamo perished to a man. The noble Travis, the fearless Colonel Bowie, and David Crockett, a very legend among frontiersmen” – Messrs. Travis, Bowie, and Crockett each had a third of the kino screen, their faces gone strangely square with the cramped scale of their depiction – “bought precious time for my Fabian strategy.”

More soldier talk. Now he stepped back from the podium and pointed up at the kino with his heavy polished cane. “The forces of Lopez de Santa Anna were arrayed as you see them here, with the woods upon his left flank and the San Jacinto river-marshes at his back. His siege engineers had dug in around the baggage-train, with emplacements of sharpened timber, represented thusly. By forced march through Burnham’s Ford, however, my army of six hundred had seized the wooded banks of Buffalo Bayou, unbeknown to enemy intelligence. The assault began with a brisk cannon-fire from the Texian centre... Now we can witness the movement of the Texian light cavalry... The shock of the foot-charge sent the enemy reeling in confusion, throwing his artillery, which was not yet limbered, into utter disarray.” The kinotrope’s blue squares and lozenges slowly chased the buckling red Mexican regiments through the chequered greens and whites of woods and swamps. Sybil shifted in her seat, trying to ease the chafing of her hoopskirt. Houston’s bloodthirsty boasting was finally reaching a climax.

“The final count of the fallen numbered two Texian dead, six hundred and thirty of the invader. The massacres of Alamo and Goliad were avenged in Santanista blood! Two Mexican armies utterly defeated, with the capture of fourteen officers and twenty cannon.”

Fourteen officers, twenty cannon – yes, that was her cue. Her moment had come. “Avenge us, General Houston!” Sybil shrieked, her throat constricted with stage-fright. She tried again, pulling herself to her feet, waving one arm, “Avenge us, General Houston!”

Houston halted, taken aback. Sybil shouted at him, shrilly. “Avenge our honour, sir! Avenge Britain’s honour!” A babble of alarm rose – Sybil felt the eyes of the theatre crowd in upon her, shocked looks that people might give a lunatic. “My brother,” she shouted, but fear had seized her, bad nerves. She hadn’t expected it to be so frightening. This was worse than singing on stage, far worse.

Houston lifted both his arms, the striped blanket spreading behind him like a cloak. Somehow he calmed the crowd by the gesture, asserted command. Above his head, the kinotrope wound slowly down, its flickering domino-tricks whirring to a stop, leaving San Jacinto frozen in mid-victory. Houston fixed Sybil with a look of mingled sternness and resignation. “What is it, my dear young lady? What troubles you? Tell me.”

Sybil gripped the back of the seat before her, closed

her eyes tight, and sang it out. “Sir, my brother is in a Texian prison! We are British, but the Texians imprisoned him, sir! They seized his farm, and his cattle! They even stole the very railway that he worked on, a British railway, built for Texas...” Her voice was faltering, despite herself. Mick wouldn’t like that, he would scold her performance. The thought put a jolt of vitality into her. She opened her eyes. “That regime, sir, the thieving Texian regime, they stole that British railway! They robbed the workers in Texas, and the stockholders here in Britain, and paid us not a penny!”

With the loss of the kinotrope’s bright play of images, the theatre’s atmosphere had changed. Everything was quite different suddenly, oddly intimate and strange. It was as if she and the General were somehow framed together, two figures on a silvered daguerreotype. A young London woman, in her bonnet and elegant shawl, reaches up with eloquent distress to the old foreign hero; both part-players now, with the surprised eyes of the public silently fixed on them.

“You suffered because of the junta?” Houston said.

“Yes, sir!” Sybil cried, a practised quaver stealing into her voice. Don’t frighten them, Mick had said, but make them pity you. “Yes, the junta did it. They have flung my brother into their vile prison, for no crime, sir, but simply because my dear brother is a Houston man! He voted for you when you became President of Texas, sir! And he would vote for you today, although I fear very much they will kill him!”

“What is your brother’s name, my dear lady?” Houston asked.

“Jones, sir,” Sybil quickly cried, “Edwin Jones of Nacogdoches, who worked for Hedgecoxe’s Railway Company.”

“I believe I know young Edward!” Houston declared, his surprise evident in his tone. He clutched his cane angrily and his heavy brows knotted.

“Listen to her, Sam!” came a sudden deep voice. Sybil, alarmed, turned to look. It was the man from the Argyll Rooms – the fat actor, with his red hair and brushed velvet waistcoat. “Those junta rascals appropriated the Hedgecoxe Railway! A pretty business, that, from a supposed British ally! Is this the gratitude they show, for years of British guidance and protection?” He sat back down.

“They’re nothing but thieves and villains!” Sybil shouted alertly. She groped quickly in memory, picking up the thread. “General Houston! I’m a defenceless woman, but you’re a man of destiny, a man of greatness! Can’t there be justice for Texas, sir? Some redress for these affronts? Must my poor brother die there in misery, while cheats and tyrants steal our British property?”

But Mick’s fine rhetoric was drowned; there were shouts from the audience, here and there, over a muttered undertone of surprise and approval. Loud boyish hooting came from the penny gallery.

A bit of London fun, all told. Perhaps, Sybil thought, she had made some of them believe her story, and pity her. Most simply howled and joked a bit, pleased to see some unexpected liveliness.

“Sam Houston was always a true friend of Britain!” Sybil shrieked, into the crowd’s upturned faces. The

words half-lost, useless, she raised the back of her wrist to her damp forehead. Mick had given her no more lines, so she let the strength seep from her legs and fell back, eyes fluttering, half-sinking into her seat.

"Give Miss Jones air!" Houston commanded in an excited bellow. "The lady is overcome!" Sybil watched through half-closed lids as blurred figures haltingly gathered around her. Dark evening jackets, a rustle of crinoline, gardenia perfume and a masculine smell of tobacco – a man seized her wrist, and felt for a pulse there with pinching fingers. A woman fanned Sybil's face, clucking to herself. Oh heaven, Sybil thought, shrinking, the fat mama from the row before her, with that intolerable oily look of a good woman doing her moral duty. A little thrill of shame and disgust shot through her. For a moment she felt genuinely weak, sinking with a buttery ease into the warmth of their concern, a half-dozen busybodies muttering around her in a shared pretence of competence, while Houston thundered on above them, hoarse with indignation.

Sybil allowed them to get her to her feet. Houston hesitated, seeing it, and there was a light gallant scatter of applause for her. She felt pale, unworthy; she smiled wanly, and shook her head, and wished she were invisible. She leaned her head on the padded shoulder of the man who had taken her pulse. "Sir, if I could go, please," she whispered.

Her rescuer nodded alertly, a little fellow with clever blue eyes. His long greying hair was parted in the middle. "I shall see the lady home," he piped at the others. He shrugged into an opera cape, perched a tall beaver hat on his head, and lent her his arm. They walked together up the aisle, Sybil leaning on him heavily, unwilling to meet anyone's eyes. The crowd was roused, now. For the first time, perhaps, they were listening to Houston as a man, rather than as some sort of queer American exhibit.

Her little gentleman held dingy velvet aside for her as they emerged into the Garrick's chilly foyer, with its flaking gilt cupids and damp-marked faux-marble walls. "'Tis very kind of you, sir, to help me so," Sybil offered, noting that her escort looked as though he might have money. "Are you a medical man?"

"I was a student once," he said, with a shrug. His cheeks were flushed, twin hot bright points of red.

"It gives a man a certain air of distinction," Sybil said, not for any particular purpose, but just to fill the silence. "Schooling of that sort, I mean."

"Hardly, madam. I wasted all my time versifying. I must say that you seem fit enough now. Very sorry to hear about that unfortunate brother of yours."

"Thank you, sir." Sybil looked at him sidelong. "I'm afraid it was very forward of me, but General Houston's eloquence carried me away."

He shot her an opaque glance, the look of a man who suspects that a woman is gulling him. "In all honesty," he said, "I do not entirely share your enthusiasm." He coughed explosively into a wadded handkerchief and wiped his mouth. "This London air will be the death of me yet."

"Nonetheless, I do thank you, sir, though I regret we've not been introduced..."

"Keats," he said, "Mr Keats." He drew a ticking silver chronometer from his waistcoat, a many-dialled

thing the size of a small potato, and consulted it. "I'm not familiar with the district," he said distantly. "I'd thought to hail you a cabriolet, but at this hour..."

"Oh, no, Mr Keats, thank you, but I shall go by the underground."

His bright eyes widened. No respectable woman rode the underground unescorted. "But you haven't told me your profession, Mr Keats," she said, hoping to distract him.

"Kinotropy," Keats said. "The techniques employed here tonight are of some special interest! While the screen's resolution is quite modest, and the refresh-rate positively slow, remarkable effects have been secured, one presumes through algorithmic compression – but I fear that is all a bit technical." He put away his chronometer. "Are you entirely certain you wouldn't rather I attempted to hail a cab? Do you know London well, Miss Jones? I might escort you to the local omnibus stand – 'tis a railless carriage, you see..."

"No, sir, thank you. You've been exceptionally kind."

"You're quite welcome," he said, his relief evident as he opened and held one of the half-glass doors to the street. Just then a skinny boy sidled rapidly up behind them, brushed past, and out of the theatre without a word. He was draped in a long dirty coat of canvas, something a fisherman might wear. A singular thing to wear to a lecture, Sybil thought, though one saw queerer garments on the poor; the sleeves flapped emptily, as though the boy were hugging himself, against a chill perhaps. His gait was odd, bent-backed, as if he were drunk or ill.

"I say there! Young man!" Mr. Keats had produced a coin, and Sybil understood that he wished the boy to hail a cab for her, but now the wet eyes gleamed at them with alarm, the pale face hollowed by gaslight. Suddenly he bolted, something dark tumbling from beneath his coat, where it rolled into the gutter. The boy halted and looked warily back at them.

He'd dropped a hat, a top hat.

He came trotting back, eyes still on them, snatched it up, stuffed it under his coat, and off again, into the shadows, though this time not nearly so rapidly.

"'Pon my word," Mr Keats said in disgust, "that fellow's a thief! That waterproof is stuffed with the hats of the audience!"

Sybil could think of nothing to say.

"I imagine the rascal took cruel advantage of that commotion you caused," Keats told her, his tone lightly etched with suspicion. "Pity! One never knows who to trust, these days."

"Sir, I do believe I hear the Engine getting up steam for the kinotrope..."

And that was enough for him.

The installation of exhaust-fans, said the *Daily Telegraph*, had wrought a perceptible improvement in the atmosphere of the Metropolitan, though Lord Babbage himself held that a truly modern underground railway would operate on pneumatic principles exclusively, involving no combustion whatever, rather in the way mail was conveyed throughout Paris.

Seated in a second-class carriage, breathing as shallowly as possible, Sybil knew it all for humbug, or in

any case the improvement part, for who knew what marvels the Rads mightn't bring forth? But hadn't the Rad papers also published the testimony of medicals, in the pay of the railroad, that sulphurous fumes were therapeutic for asthma? And it wasn't only the fumes from the engines, but vile sewer-seepings as well, and gassy leakings from collapsible India-rubber bags, that lit the carriage-jets in their wire-netted glass shades.

It was a queer business, the underground, when you thought about it, racketing along at such speeds, through the darkness under London, where the navvies had come upon lead water-pipes of the Romans, and coins, mosaics and archways, elephant's teeth a thousand years old...

And the digging went on, this and every night, for she'd heard their great machine huffing, as she'd stood by Mick on the Whitechapel pavement; they worked unceasingly, the excavators, boring newer, deeper lines now, down below the tangle of sewers and gas-pipes and bricked-over rivers. The new lines were shored with steel; perhaps one day Lord Babbage's smokeless trains would slide through them silent as eels, though she found the thought of it unclean, somehow.

The lamps flared all at once, the flow of gas disturbed by a particularly sharp jolt, the faces of the other passengers seeming to leap out at her: the sallow gent with something of the successful publican about him, the round-cheeked old Quaker cleric, the drunken dandy with his coat open, his canary waistcoat all dotted down the front with claret...

There were no other women in the carriage.

Farewell to you, sirs, she imagined herself crying, *farewell to your London*, for she was a 'prentice adventuress now, sworn and true, bound for Paris, though the first leg of the voyage consisted necessarily of the tuppenny trip back to Whitechapel...

But the clergyman had noticed her, his contempt quite open, there for anyone to see.

It was really quite horribly cold, making her way from the station to her room in Flower and Dean Street; she regretted her vanity, for having chosen her fine new shawl rather than her mantelet. Her teeth were chattering. Sharp frost shone in pools of gaslight on the street's new macadam.

The cobbles of London were vanishing month by month, paved over with black stuff that poured stinking hot from the maws of great wagons, for navvies to spread and smooth with rakes, before the advance of the steamroller.

A daring fellow whisked past her, taking full advantage of the gritty new surface. Nearly recumbent within the creaking frame of a four-wheeled velocipede, his shoes were strapped to whirling cranks and his breath puffed explosively into the cold. He was bare-headed and goggled, in a thick striped jersey, a long knit scarf flapping out behind him as he sped away. Sybil supposed him an inventor.

London was rife with inventors, the poorer and madder of them congregating in the public squares to display their blueprints and models, and harangue the strolling crowds. In a week's time she'd encountered a wicked-looking device meant to crimp hair by electricity, a child's mechanical top that played



Beethoven, and a scheme for electroplating the dead.

Leaving the thoroughfare for the unimproved cobbles of Renton Passage, she made out the sign of the Hart and heard the jangle of a pianola. It was Mrs Winterhalter who'd arranged for her to room above the Hart. The public house itself was a steady sort of place, admitting no women. It catered to junior clerks and shopmen, and offered as its raciest pleasure a pull at a coin-fed wagering-machine.

The rooms above were reached by way of steep dark stairs, that climbed below a sooty skylight to an alcove presenting a pair of identical doors. Mr Cairns, the landlord, had rooms behind the door on the left.

Sybil climbed the stairs, fumbled a penny box of lucifers from her muff, and struck one. Cairns had chained a bicycle to the iron railing overlooking the stairwell; the bright brass padlock gleamed in the flare of the match. She shook the lucifer out, hoping that Hetty hadn't double-latched the door. Hetty hadn't, and Sybil's key turned smoothly in the lock.

Toby was there to greet her, padding silently across the bare boards to twine himself around and about her ankles, purring like sixty.

Hetty had left an oil-lamp turned down low on the deal table that stood in the hallway; it was smoking now, the wick in need of trimming. A foolish thing to have left it burning, where Toby might've sent it crashing, but Sybil felt grateful not to have found the place in darkness. She took Toby up in her arms. He smelled of herring. "Has Hetty fed you, then, dear?" He yowled softly, and batted at the ribbons of her bonnet.

The faded pattern of the wallpaper danced as she lifted the lamp. The hallway had seen no sunlight in all the years the Hart had stood, and the printed flowers were gone a shade like dust.

Sybil's room had two windows, though they opened on a blank wall of dirty yellow brick, so near she could've touched it if someone hadn't driven nails into the casements. Still, on a bright day, with the sun directly overhead, a bit of light did filter in. And Hetty's room, though larger, had only one window. If Hetty was here, now, she must be alone and asleep, as no light was visible from the crack at the bottom of her closed door.

It was good to have one's own room, one's privacy, however modest. Sybil put Toby down, though he protested, and carried the lamp to her own door, which stood slightly ajar. Inside, all was as she'd left it, though she saw that Hetty had left her the latest number of *The Illustrated London News* on her pillow, with an engraving from Crimea on the front, a scene of a city aflame. She set the lamp down on the cracked marble lid of the commode, Toby prowling about her ankles as though he expected to discover more herring, and considered what she should do.

The ticking of the fat tin alarm-clock, which she sometimes found unbearable, was reassuring now; at least it was running, and she imagined that the time it showed, quarter past eleven, was correct. She gave the winder a few turns, just for luck. Mick would come for her at midnight, and there were decisions to be made, as he'd advised her to travel very light.

She took a wick-trimmer from the commode's drawer, raised the lamp's chimney, and scissored away the blackened bit. The light improved somewhat.

She threw on her mantalet against the cold, opened the lid of a japanned tin chest, and began to make an inventory of her better things. But after setting aside two changes of undergarments, it came to her that the less she took, the more Dandy Mick would have to buy for her in Paris. And if that wasn't thinking like a 'prentice adventuress, she didn't know what was.

Still, she did have some things she was especially fond of, and these went, along with the undergarments, into her brocade portmanteau with the split seam she'd meant to mend. There was a lovely bottle of rose-scented Portland water, half-full, a green paste brooch from Mr Kingsley, a set of hairbrushes with imitation ebony backs, a miniature flower-press with a souvenir view of Kensington Palace, and a patent German curling-iron she'd nicked from a hairdresser's. She added a bone-handled toothbrush and a tin of camphorated dentifrice.

Now she took a tiny silver propelling-pencil and settled herself on the edge of her bed to write a note to Hetty. The pencil was a gift from Mr Chadwick, with THE METROPOLITAN RAILWAY CORPORATION engraved along its shaft; the plate was starting to flake away from the brass beneath. For paper, she found she had only the back of a handbill advertising instantaneous chocolate.

My dear Harriet, she began, I am Off to Paris, but then she paused, removed the pencil's cap, and used the rubber to erase those last three words, substituting run Away with a Gentleman. Do not be alarmed, I am Well. You are welcome to any Cloathes I leave behind, and please do take Care of dear Toby and give him Herring. Yrs. sincerely, Sybil.

It made her feel queer to write it, and when she looked down at Toby she felt sad, and false, to leave him.

With this thought came thoughts of Radley. She was struck by a sudden and utter conviction of his falsehood.

"He will come," she whispered fiercely. She put the lamp and the folded note on the narrow mantel.

On the mantel lay a flat tin, brightly lithographed with the name of a Strand tobacconist. She knew that it contained Turkish cigarettes. One of Hetty's younger gentlemen, a medical student, had once urged her to take up the habit. Sybil generally avoided medical students. They prided themselves on studious beastliness. But now, in the grip of a powerful nervous impulse, she opened the tin, drew out one of the crisp paper cylinders, and inhaled its fierce perfume.

A Mr Stanley, a barrister, well known among the flash mob, had smoked cigarettes incessantly. Stanley, during his acquaintanceship with Sybil, had frequently remarked that a cigarette was the thing to steel a gambler's nerve.

Fetching the lucifers, Sybil placed the cigarette between her lips, as she'd seen Stanley do, struck a lucifer, and remembered to let the bulk of the sulphur burn away before applying the flame to the cigarette's tip. She drew hesitantly on the lit cigarette and was rewarded with an acrid portion of vile smoke that set her racking like a consumptive. Eyes watering, she nearly flung the thing away.

She stood before the grate and forced herself to continue, drawing periodically on the cigarette and flicking pale delicate ash onto the coals with the gesture

Stanley had used. It was barely tolerable, she decided, and where was the desired effect? She felt abruptly ill, her stomach churning with nausea, her hands gone cold as ice. Coughing explosively, she dropped the cigarette into the coals, where it burst into flame and was swiftly consumed.

She became painfully aware of the ticking of the clock.

Big Ben began to sound the midnight.

Where was Mick?

She woke in darkness, filled with a fear she couldn't name. Then she remembered Mick. The lamp had gone out. The coals were dead. Scrambling to her feet, she fetched the box of lucifers, then felt her way into her room, where the tinny ticking of the clock guided her to the commode.

When she struck a match, the face of the clock seemed to swim in the sulphur glare.

It was half past one.

Had he come when she was sleeping, knocked, had no answer, and gone away without her? No, not Mick. He'd have found a way in, if he wanted her. Had he gulled her, then, for the cakey girl she surely was, to trust his promises?

A queer sort of calm swept over her, a cruel clarity. She remembered the departure date on the steamship ticket. He wouldn't sail from Dover 'til late tomorrow, and it seemed unlikely that he and General Houston would be departing London, after an important lecture, in the dead of night. She'd go to Grand's, then, and find Mick, confront him, and plead, threaten blackmail, exposure, whatever proved necessary.

What tin she had was in her muff. There was a cabstand in Minories, by Goodman's Yard. She would go there now, and rouse a cabman to take her to Piccadilly.

Toby cried once, piteously, as she closed the door behind her. She scraped her shin cruelly in the dark, on Cairns' chained bicycle.

She was half-way down Minories to Goodman's Yard when she remembered her portmanteau, but there was no turning back.

Grand's night doorman was heavy-set, cold-eyed, chin-whiskered, stiff in one leg, and very certainly wouldn't allow Sybil into his hotel, not if he could help it. She'd twigged him from a block away, climbing down from her cabriolet – a big gold-braided bugaboo, lurking on the hotel's marble steps under great dolphin-wreathed lamps. She knew her doormen well enough; they played a major role in her life.

It was one thing to enter Grand's on Dandy Mick's arm, by daylight. But to walk in boldly from the midnight streets, as an unescorted woman, was another matter. Only whores did that, and the doorman would not let whores in. But she might think of a likely story to gull him, perhaps, if she thought of a very good lie, and if he were stupid, or careless, or weary. Or she might try to bribe him, though she had little enough tin left, after the cab. And she was dressed proper, not in the flash clothes of a dollymop. She might, at a pinch, distract him. Smash a window with a cobblestone, and run past him when he came to look. It was hard to run in crinoline, but he was lame, and slow.

Or find a street-boy to throw a stone for her...

Sybil stood in darkness, by the wooden hoardings of a construction site. Broadside posters loomed over her, bigger than bedsheets, with great tattered shouting print: DAILY NEWS World-Wide Circulation, LLOYD'S NEWS Only One Penny, SOUTH-EASTERN RAILWAY Ramsgate & Margate 7/6. Sybil pulled one hand from her muff and gnawed feverishly at her fingernail, which smelled of Turkish tobacco. She was dully surprised to notice that her hand was blue-white with the cold, and trembling badly.

Pure luck, it seemed, rescued her then, or the nod of a sorrowing angel, for a shining gurney brougham came to a chugging halt in front of Grand's, its blue-coated fireman jumping down to lower the hinged step. Out came a rollicking mob of drunken Frenchmen in scarlet-lined capes, with brocade waistcoats and tasselled evening canes, and two of them had women with them.

Sybil grabbed up her skirt on the instant and scurried forward, head down. Crossing the street, she was hidden from the doorman by the barricade of the gurney's gleaming coachwork. Then she simply walked around it, past the great wood-spoked wheels with their treads of rubber, and boldly joined the group. The Frenchies were parley-vousing at each other, moustache-stroking and giggling, and did not seem to notice her, nor care. She smiled piously at no one in particular, and stood very close to a tall one, who seemed drunkest. They staggered up the marble stairs, and the tall Frenchman slapped a pound-note at the doorman's hand, with the careless ease of a man who didn't know what real money was. The doorman blinked at it and touched his braided hat.

And Sybil was safely inside. She walked with the jabbering Frenchies across a wilderness of polished marble to the hotel desk, where they collected their keys from the night-clerk and staggered up the curving stairway, yawning and grinning, leaving Sybil behind at the counter.

The night-clerk, who spoke French, was chuckling over something he'd overheard. He sidled down the length of lintelled mahogany, with a smile for Sybil. "How may I be of service, madame?"

The words came hard, almost stammering at first. "Could you tell me please, has a Mr Michael... Or, rather... Is General Sam Houston still registered here?"

"Yes, madame. I did see General Houston, earlier this evening. However, he's in our smoking room now... Perhaps you could leave a message?"

"Smoking room?"

"Yes – over there, behind the acanthus." The clerk nodded toward a massive door at the corner of the lobby. "Our smoking room is not for the ladies, of course... Forgive me, madame, but you seem a bit distressed. If the matter's vital, perhaps I should send a page."

"Yes," Sybil said, "that would be wonderful." The night-clerk obligingly produced a sheet of cream-laid hotel stationery and proffered his gold-nibbed reservoir pen.

She wrote hastily, folded the note, scrawled MR MICHAEL RADLEY on the back. The night-clerk crisply rang a bell, bowed in response to her thanks, and went about his business.

Shortly a yawning and sour-faced little page appeared and placed her note on a cork-topped salver.

Sybil trailed anxiously behind as he trudged to the smoking room. "It is for the General's personal secretary," she said.

"'Tis awright, miss, I know 'im." He heaved one-handed at the smoking-room door. As it opened, and the page passed through, Sybil peered in. As the door slowly closed, she had a long glimpse of Houston, bareheaded, shiny-faced and sweaty-drunk, with one booted foot propped on the table, beside a cut-glass decanter. He had a wicked-looking jack-knife in his hand, and was puffing smoke and jabbing at something – whittling, that was it, for the floor around his leather chair was littered with wood-shavings.

A tall bearded Englishman murmured something to Houston. The stranger had his left arm caught in a white silk sling, and looked sad-eyed and dignified and important. Mick stood at his side, bending at the waist to light the man's cheroot. Sybil saw him rasping at a steel sparker, on the end of a dangling rubber gas-tube, and then the door shut.

Sybil sat on a *chaise-longue* in the echoing marble lobby, warmth stealing through her damp, grimy shoes; her toes began to ache. Then the page emerged with Mick on his heels, Mick smiling back into the smoking-room and sketching out a cheery half-salute. Sybil rose from her seat. Seeing her there, his narrow face went bleak.

He came to her quickly, took her elbow. "Bloody Christ," he muttered, "what kind of silly note was that? Can't you make sense, girl?"

"What is it?" she pleaded. "Why didn't you come for me?"

"Bit of a *contretemps*, I'm afraid. Case of the fox biting his own arse. Might be funny if it weren't so bleeding difficult. But having you here now may change matters..."

"What's gone wrong? Who's that gentry cove with the gammy arm?"

"Bloody British diplomat as doesn't care for the General's plan to raise an army in Mexico. Never you mind him. Tomorrow we'll be in France, and he'll be here in London, annoyin' someone else. At least I hope so... The General's queered things for us, though. Drunk as a lord and he's pulled one of his funny little tricks... He's a nasty bastard when he drinks, truth to tell. Starts to forget his friends."

"He's gulled you somehow," Sybil realized. "He wants to cut you loose, is that it?"

"He's nicked my kino cards," Mick said.

"But I mailed them to Paris, *poste restante*," Sybil said. "Just as you told me to do."

"Not those, you goose – the kino cards from the speech!"

"Your theatre cards? He stole 'em?"

"He knew I had to pack my cards, take 'em along with me, don't you see? So he kept a watch on me somehow, and now he's nicked 'em from my baggage. Says he won't need me in France after all, so long as he's got my information. He'll hire some onion-eater can run a kino on the cheap. Or so he says."

"But that's theft!"

"'Borrowing,' according to him. Says he'll give me back my cards, as soon as he's had 'em copied. That way I don't lose nothin', you see?"

Sybil felt dazed. Was he teasing her? "But isn't that stealing, somehow?"

"Try arguing that with Samuel bloody Houston! He stole a whole damn' country once, stole it clean and picked it to the bone!"

"But you're his man! You can't let him steal from you."

Mick cut her off. "When it comes to that – you might well ask how I had that fancy French programme made. You might say I borrowed the General's money for it, so to speak." He showed his teeth in a grin. "Not the first time we've tried such a stunt on one another. It's a bit of a test, don't you see? Fellow has to be a right out-and-outer, to travel with General Houston..."

"Oh Lord," Sybil said, collapsing into her crinoline on the chaise. "Mick, if you but knew what I've been thinking..."

"Brace up, then!" He hauled her to her feet. "I need those cards and they're in his room. You're going to find them for me, and nick 'em back. And I'm going back in there and brass it out, cool as ice." He laughed. "The old bastard mightn't have tried this, if not for my tricks at his lecture. You an' Corny Simms made him feel he was right and fly, pulling strings! But we'll make a pigeon of him yet, you and I, together..."

"I'm afraid, Mick," Sybil said. "I don't know how to steal things!"

"You little goose, of course you do," Mick said.

"Well, will you come with me and help, then?"

"Of course not! He'd know then, wouldn't he? I told him you were a newspaper friend of mine. If I stay too long talking, he'll smell a rat sure." He glared at her.

"All right," Sybil said, defeated. "Give me the key to his room."

Mick grunted. "Key? I haven't any bloody key."

A wash of relief went through her. "Well, then, I'm not a cracksman, you know!"

"Keep your voice down, else you'll tell everyone in Grand's..." His eyes glinted furiously. He was drunk, Sybil realized. She'd never seen Mick really drunk before, and now he was lushed, lightning-struck. It didn't show in his voice or his walk, but he was crazy and bold with it. "I'll get you a key. Go to that counter-man, blarney him. Keep him busy. And don't look at me." He gave her half a shove. "Go!"

Terrified, she returned to the counter. The Grand's telegraph stood at the far end, a ticking brass machine on a low marble pedestal decorated with leafy gilt vines. Within a sort of bell-glass, a gilded needle swung to and fro, pointing out letters in a concentric alphabet. With every twitch of the needle, something in the marble base clunked methodically, causing another quarter-inch of neatly perforated yellow paper tape to emerge from the marble base. The night-clerk, who was punching binder-holes in a bundle of fan-fold paper, set his work aside, clipped on a pince-nez, and came toward her.

"Yes, madame?"

"I need to send a telegram. It is rather urgent."

The clerk deftly assembled a small box of punch-cards, a hinged brass perforator, a neatly ruled form. He took out the reservoir-pen Sybil had used earlier. "Yes, madame. Citizen number?"

"Oh... Would that be my number, or his?"

"That would depend, madame. Are you planning to pay by national credit?"

"May I charge it to my room?" Sybil hedged.

"Certainly, madame. Room number?"

Sybil hesitated for as long as she dared. "I suppose I'll pay cash, actually."

"Very well. Now, the addressee's citizen number?"

"I'm afraid I don't know it, actually." She blinked at the clerk and began to chew on one knuckle.

He was very patient. "You do have a name and address, though?"

"Oh yes," Sybil said hastily. "Mr Charles Egremont, MP, 'The Beeches,' Belgravia, London."

The clerk wrote this down. "It is rather more costly to send a wire with only an address, madame. It's more efficient to route it direct through the Central Statistics Bureau." Sybil had not been looking for Mick. She had been afraid to look. Now, from the corner of her eye, she saw a dark form scuttle across the lobby floor. Mick was bent almost double, with his shoes off, the laces knotted around his neck. He charged headlong at the waist-high mahogany counter, grabbed the forward edge two-handed, vaulted over it in a split-second, and vanished.

He had made no sound at all.

"Something to do with the way an Engine handles messages," the clerk was explaining.

"Indeed," Sybil said. "But I haven't his citizen number. I shall have to pay the extra, then, shan't I? This is very important."

"Yes, madame. I'm sure it is. Pray go on, and I shall take dictation."

"I don't suppose I should begin with my address and the date? I mean, a telegram's not a letter, really, is it?"

"No, madame."

"Or his address, either?"

"Brevity is the essence of telegraphy, madame."

Mick would be creeping to the hotel's mahogany pegboard, which hung clustered with room-keys. She couldn't see him, but now she imagined she could hear him moving, almost smell him, and the clerk needed only to glance to his right to discover a sneak-thief creeping toward him, crazy-eyed and crouching like an ape.

"Please take this down," Sybil quavered. "Dear Charles." The clerk began scribbling. "Nine years ago you put me to the worst dishonour that a woman can know."

The clerk stared in horror at his pen, a hot flush creeping up past his collar.

"Charles, you promised me that you would save my poor father. Instead you corrupted me, body and soul. Today I am leaving London, in the company of powerful friends. They know very well what a traitor you were to Walter Gerard, and to me. Do not attempt to find me, Charles. It would be useless. I do hope that you and Mrs Egremont will sleep soundly tonight." Sybil shuddered. "Sign that 'Sybil Gerard,' if you please."

"Yes, madame," the clerk muttered, eyes downcast as Mick sprang silently back over the counter in his stocking feet. Mick crouched low, hidden by the counter's bulk, then crept off quickly on his haunches, waddling across the marble floor, like a monstrous

duck. In a moment he had rolled behind a pair of overstuffed chairs.

"What do I owe?" Sybil asked the clerk politely.

"Two and six," the clerk stammered, quite unable to meet her eyes.

She counted it out from the little clasp-purse she took from her muff, and left the red-faced clerk at his station, punching telegram-cards from his box.

Mick came strolling like a gentleman across the lobby. He paused beside a reading-rack hung with neatly-ironed newspapers. He bent down, coolly re-tying his shoes, straightened, and she saw the glint of metal in his hand. Not bothering even to catch her eye, he tucked the key behind a cut velvet cushion on the *chaise-longue*. Then he stood briskly, straightened his tie, brushed at his sleeves, and strode straight off into the smoking room.

Sybil sat for a moment on the chaise, pretending to read a gold-spined monthly, *Transactions of the Royal Society*. Carefully, with the fingertips of her right hand, she fished behind her for the key. Here it was, with the number 24 engraved on the oval brass. She yawned, in what she hoped was a ladylike fashion, and stood to retire upstairs, entirely as if she had a room there.

Her feet ached. As she trudged along the silent gaslit hall, toward Houston's suite, she felt a sudden amazement at having struck out at Charles Egremont. Needing some dramatic message to distract the clerk, she'd blurted out threats and rage. It had come boiling out of her, almost without her will. It puzzled her, and even frightened her, after having imagined that she'd almost forgotten the man.

She could imagine the fear on Egremont's face when he read her telegram. She remembered his face well enough, fatuous and successful, which always looked as though it meant well, always apologized, always preached at her, and whined, and begged, and wept, and sinned. He was a fool.

But now she'd let Mick Radley set her to thieving. If she were clever, she should walk out of Grand's Hotel, vanish into the depths of London, and never see Radley again. She should not let the 'prentice oath hold her. To break an oath was frightening, but no more vile than her other sins. Yet somehow here she was; she had let him do with her as he would.

She stopped before the door, looked up and down the deserted corridor, fingered the stolen key. Why was she doing this? Because Mick was strong, and she was weak? Because he knew secrets that she didn't? For the first time, it occurred to her that she might be in love with him. Perhaps she did love him, in some strange way, and if that were true, it might explain matters to her, in a way which was almost soothing. If she were in love, she had a right to burn her bridges, to walk on air, to live by impulse. And if she loved Radley, it was finally something she knew, which he didn't. Her secret alone.

Sybil unlocked the door nervously, rapidly. She slipped through, shut it behind her, set her back against it. She stood in darkness.

There was a lamp in the room somewhere. She could smell its burnt wick. In the wall opposite, the outline emerged of a square curtained window to the street, between the curtains a faint knife-slice of

upwashed gaslight. She faltered her way into the room, hands outstretched, until she felt the solid polished bulk of a bureau, and made out the dim sheen of a lamp-glass there. She lifted the lamp, shook it. It had oil. Now she needed a lucifer.

She felt for drawers in the bureau. For some reason they were already open. She rustled through them. Stationery. Useless, and someone had spilled ink in one of the drawers; she could smell it.

Her fingers brushed a box of lucifers, which she recognized less by touch than by the dry familiar rattle. Her fingers, really, didn't seem to be working properly. The first lucifer popped and fizzled out, refusing to light, filling the room with a vile smell of sulphur. The second showed her the lamp. Her hands were trembling badly as she raised the chimney and applied flame to the wick.

She saw her own lamplit reflection staring wild-eyed from tilted cheval-glass, then doubled in beveled mirrors set into the twin doors of a wardrobe. She noticed clothing scattered on the bed, on the floor...

A man was sitting on the arm of a chair, crouched there like a great shadowed crow, an enormous knife in his hand.

He stood then, but slowly, with a creak of leather, like some huge wooden puppet that had lain years in the dust. He was wrapped in a long and shapeless grey coat. His nose and jaw were draped with a dark kerchief.

"Best be quiet now, missy," he said, holding up the massive blade — dark cleaver-like steel. "Sam comin'?"

Sybil found her voice. "Please don't kill me!"

"Old goat still whorin', is he?" The slow Texian voice slid forth like treacle; Sybil could barely make out his words. "You his fancy-gal?"

"No!" Sybil said, her voice strangled. "No, I'm not, I swear it! I... I came here to steal from him, and that's the truth!"

There was a ghastly silence.

"Take a look 'round you."

Sybil did so, trembling. The room had been ransacked.

"Nothin' here to steal," the man said. "Where is he, gal?"

"He's downstairs," Sybil said. "He's drunk! But I don't know him, I swear! My man sent me here, that's all! I didn't want to do this! He made me do it!"

"Quiet, now," he said. "I wouldn't hurt a white woman, 'less I had to. Put out that lamp."

"Let me go," she pleaded. "I'll go straight away! I meant no harm!"

"Harm?" The slow voice was heavy with gallows certainty. "What harm there is, it's for Houston, and that's justice."

"I didn't steal the cards! I didn't touch them!"

"Cards?" He laughed, a dry sound at the back of his throat.

"The cards don't belong to Houston. He stole them!"

"Houston stole plenty," the man said, but clearly he was puzzled. He was thinking about her, and was not happy about it. "What they call you?"

"Sybil Jones." She took a breath. "I'm a British subject!"

"My," the man said. He clicked his tongue.

His masked face was unreadable. Sweat shone on

a strip of pale smooth skin across the top of his forehead. A hatbrim had rested there, Sybil realized, to shield him from the Texian sun. He came forward now and took the lamp from her, turning down the wick. His fingers, when they brushed her hand, were dry and hard as wood.

In the darkness, there was only the pounding of her heart and the Texian's terrible presence.

"You must be lonely here in London," Sybil blurted, desperate to avoid another silence.

"Maybe Houston's lonesome. I got a better conscience." The Texian's voice was sharp. "You ever ask if he's lonesome?"

"I don't know him," she insisted.

"You're here. A woman come alone to his rooms."

"I came for the kino cards. Paper cards, with holes in them. That's all, I swear!" No answer. "Do you know what a kinotrope is?"

"Nother damn machine," the Texian said wearily.

Another silence.

"Don't lie to me," he said at last. "You're a whore, that's all. You ain't the first whore I ever seen."

She heard him cough behind his kerchief, and snort wetly. "You ain't bad-lookin', though," he said. "In Texas, you could marry. Start all over."

"I'm sure that would be wonderful," Sybil said.

"Never enough white women in the country. Get you a decent man, 'stead o' some pimp." He lifted his kerchief, and spat on the floor.

"Hate pimps," he announced tonelessly. "Hate 'em like I hate Injuns. Or Mexicans. Mexican Injuns... French Mexican Injuns with guns, three, four hundred strong. On horseback, got them wind-up rifles, closest thing to devils on earth."

"But the Texians are heroes," Sybil said, desperately trying to remember a name from Houston's speech. "I heard about... about Alamo."

"Goliad," the voice gone to a dry whisper, "I was at Goliad."

"I heard about that, too," Sybil said quickly. "That must have been glorious."

The Texian hawked, spat again. "Fought 'em two days. No water. Colonel Fannin surrendered. They took us prisoner, all the niceties, polite as you please. Next day they marched us out of town. Shot us down in cold blood. Just lined us up. Massacred us."

Sybil said nothing.

"Massacred the Alamo. Burned all the bodies... Massacred the Meir Expedition. Made 'em pick beans. Little clay lottery pot, pull out a black bean and they kill you. That's Mexicans for you."

"Mexicans," she repeated.

"Comanches are worse."

From somewhere off in the night came the scream of a great friction-brake, and then a dull distant pounding.

Black beans. Goliad. Her head was a Babel. Beans and massacre and this man whose skin was like leather. He stank like a navvy, of horses and sweat. Down Neal Street she'd once paid tuppence to view a diorama of some vast waste in America, a nightmare of twisted stone. The Texian looked born from such a place, and it came to her then that all the wildernesses of Houston's speech, all the places with such queer improbable names, were truly real, inhabited by creatures such as this. And Mick had said that Houston had stolen a country once, and now this one had

followed, an avenging angel. She fought down an insane desire to laugh.

She remembered the old woman then, the vendor of rock oil in Whitechapel, and the queer look she'd given Mick when he'd questioned her. Did others work in concert with the angel of Goliad? How had so strange a figure managed to enter Grand's tonight, to enter a locked room? Where could such a man hide, even in London, even amid the tattered hordes of American refugees?

"Say he's drunk?" the Texian said.

Sybil started horribly. "What?"

"Houston."

"Oh. Yes. In the smoking room. Very drunk."

"Be his last, then. He alone?"

"He..." Mick. "He's with a tall man. I don't know him."

"Beard on 'im? Arm broke?"

"I... Yes."

He made a sucking sound between his teeth, then leather creaked as he shrugged.

Something rattled, to Sybil's left. In the faint glow from the curtained window she glimpsed the gleaming facets of the cut-glass doorknob as it began to twist. The Texian leapt from his chair.

With the palm of one hand pressed tight against her mouth, he held the great dirk before her, a hideous thing like an elongated cleaver, tapering to a point. A length of brass ran along its spine; with the blade inches from her eyes she saw notches and nicks along the brass. And then the door was opening, Mick ducking through, his head and shoulders stencilled out by the light in the corridor.

She must have struck her head against the wall, when the Texian flung her aside, but then she was kneeling, the crinoline bunched beneath her, watching the man hoist Mick against the wall, a single great hand about his throat, the heels of Mick's shoes beating a frantic tattoo against the wainscoting – until the long blade struck, twisted, struck again, filling the room with the hot reek of Butchers Row.

And all that happened after, in that room, was a dream to Sybil, or a play she watched, or some kino-show wrought with balsa-bits so numerous, so tiny and so cleverly worked, as to blur reality. For the Texian, lowering Mick quietly to the floor, closed and re-locked the door, his movements unhurried and methodical.

She swayed where she knelt, then sagged against the wall behind the bureau. Mick was dragged away, heels scraping, into the deeper darkness beside the wardrobe. The Texian knelt over him – there was a rustle of clothing, the slap of the card-case flung aside, a jingle of change and the sound of a single coin, falling, rolling, spinning on the hardwood floor...

And there came from the door a scratching, the rattle of metal on metal – the sound of a drunken man trying a keyhole.

Houston, throwing the door wide, lurched forward on his heavy stick. He belched thunderously and rubbed the site of his old wound. "Sons of bitches," he said, hoarse with drink, listing violently, the stick coming down with a sharp crack at each step. "Radley? Come out, you little whelp." He'd neared the bureau now, and Sybil snatched her fingers back

silently, afraid of the the weight of his boots.

The Texian closed the door.

"Radley!"

"Evenin', Sam."

Her room above the Hart seemed distant as childhood's first memories, here in the smell of slaughter, in this dark where giants moved. Houston reeled suddenly to slash at the curtains with his cane, tore them open, gaslight catching the patterns of frost on the glass of each mullioned pane, illuminating the Texian's kerchief and the grim eyes above it, eyes distant and merciless as winter stars. Houston staggered at the sight, the striped blanket sliding from his shoulders. His medals gleamed, quivered.

"Rangers sent me, Sam." Mick's little pepperbox pistol looked a toy in the Texian's hand, the clustered barrels winking as he took aim.

"Who are you, son?" Houston asked, all trace of drunkenness abruptly gone from his deep voice. "You Wallace? Take off that neckcloth. Face me man to man..."

"You ain't giving no more orders, General. Shouldn't ought to have took what you did. You robbed us, Sam. Where is it? Where's that treasury money?"

"Ranger," Houston said, his voice a rich syrup of patience and sincerity, "you've been misled. I know who sent you, and I know their lies and slanders against me. But I swear to you that I stole nothing – those funds are mine by right, the sacred trust of the Texas government-in-exile."

"You sold Texas out for British gold," the Ranger said. "We need that money, for guns and food. We're starvin', and they're killin' us." A pause. "And you mean to help 'em do it."

"The Republic of Texas can't defy the world's great powers, Ranger. I know it's bad in Texas, and my heart aches for my country, but there can't be peace till I'm back in command."

"You got no money left, do you?" the Ranger said. "I looked, and it ain't here. You sold your fancy estate in the countryside... you threw it all away, Sam, on whores and drink and fancy theatre shows for foreigners. And now you want to come back with a Mexican army. You're a thief, and a drunk, and a traitor."

"God damn you," Houston roared, and flung open his coat with both hands, "you're a cowardly assassin, you filthy-mouthed son of a bitch. If you think you have the guts to kill the father of your country, then shoot for the heart." He thumped his chest.

"For Texas." The pepperbox spat a flare of orange flame, edged with blue, hurling Houston back against the wall. Houston crashed to the floor as the avenger pounced, crouching to thrust the muzzles of the little pistol against the gaudy leopard waistcoat. There was a gun-blast into Houston's chest, then another, then a loud snap as the delicate trigger broke in the Ranger's fist.

The Ranger flung Mick's gun aside. Houston sprawled, unmoving, red sparks crawling through the fur of the leopard waistcoat.

There were sleepy shouts of alarm from another room. The Texian seized Houston's cane and began to batter the window; glass shattered, crashing to the pavement below, mullions gave way, and then he was scrambling out, across the sill. He froze there, for an instant, icy wind tugging at his long coat, and Sybil,

in her trance, was reminded of her first sight of him: a vast dark crow, poised now for flight.

He jumped from sight, Houston's destroyer, the angel of Goliad, and was gone, leaving her in silence and rising terror, as if his vanishing had broken a spell. She began to crawl forward, quite without aim and cruelly hampered by her crinoline, yet it was as if her limbs moved of their own accord. The heavy cane lay on the floor, but its head, a gilt brass raven, had snapped free of the shaft.

Houston moaned.

"Please be quiet," she said, "you're dead."

"Who are you?" he said, and coughed.

The floor was littered with shards of glass, sharp under her palms. No. Bright. Like pebbles. The cane, she saw, was hollow, and had spilled its tight nesting of cotton-wool, where more of the pebbles nested. Bright, bright diamonds. Her hands scooped them together, wadding the cotton-wool, to thrust the lot into her bodice, between her breasts.

She turned to Houston then. He still lay on his back, and she watched in fascination as a bloodstain spread along his ribs. "Help me," Houston grunted. "I can't breathe." He tugged at his waistcoat's buttons and it came open, showing neat inner pockets of black silk, stuffed tight with dense packs of paper: thick punch-card-packs in glued brown wrappers, their intricate perforations surely ruined now by the hot impact of bullets...and blood, for at least one slug had struck him true.

Sybil rose and walked, giddily, toward the door. Her foot squelched moistly in the red-splashed shadows by the wardrobe, and she looked down, to see an open card-case in red morocco, with a pair of tickets in a heavy nickel-plate clip. She stooped, picked it up.

"Get me to my feet," Houston demanded, his voice stronger now, tinged with urgency and irritation. "Where's my walking-stick? Where's Radley?"

The room seemed to rock beneath her, like a ship at sea, but she crossed to the door, opened it, stepped out, closed it behind her, and continued, like any gentry girl, along the gaslit and utterly respectable corridors of Grand's Hotel.

The South-Eastern Railway Company's London Bridge Terminus was a vast drafty hall of iron and soot-blown glass. Quakers moved among the avenues of benches, offering pamphlets to the seated travellers. Red-coated Irish soldiers, red-eyed from the night's gin, glowered at the close-shaven missionaries as they passed. The French passengers all seemed to be returning home with pineapples, sweet exotic bounty from the docks of London. Even the plump little actress who sat opposite Sybil had her pineapple, its green spikes protruding from a covered basket at her feet.

The train flew through Bermondsey and out into little streets of new brick, red tile. Dust heaps, market gardens, waste ground. A tunnel.

The darkness about her stank of burnt gunpowder.

Sybil closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she saw crows flapping above a barren down, and the wires of the electric telegraph all alive, blurring, moving up and down in the intervals between poles, dancing in the wind of her passage toward France.

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William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), is the most praised new American science-fiction writer of the past decade. Lately he has been busy in Hollywood, where his various projects have included work on the script of the third *Alien* film as well as a movie based on his own short story "Burning Chrome." **Bruce Sterling** was the leading spokesman for the Cyberpunk movement during the mid- 1980s, and has also received great praise for his novels, which include *Schismatrix* (1985) and *Islands in the Net* (1988). He is a regular columnist for this magazine. Gibson's last story in *Interzone* was "The Winter Market" (no. 15) and Sterling's last was "The Compassionate, the Digital" (no. 14). Their collaborative novel *The Difference Engine*, of which the above piece is the opening segment, is due to be published in the UK by Victor Gollancz Ltd.



Photo of Sterling & Gibson by Hester Doove

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The Big Sellers, 8: Whitley Strieber

by Brendan Wignall

My interest in Whitley Strieber is a recent one: I knew of *Communion* of course, one of the marketing successes of the 1980s, "A True Story: Encounters with the Unknown," for which he received a \$1 million dollar advance from his publishers, but I first took him seriously when the review copy of his 1989 novel *Majestic* arrived and I was asked to interview him for *The Oxford Times*.

Before the interview I read his earlier books *Communion* and *Transformation*, both concerning Whitley's contact with the aliens, and then *Majestic*, another "true story" but this time about someone else's contact with aliens. Reading these three left me puzzled: Strieber, I knew, was a commercially successful writer – how on earth could this be squared with the self-indulgent implausibility of *Communion* and *Transformation* and the sheer awfulness of *Majestic*?

Communion (1987) and *Transformation* (1988) both deal with Strieber's experiences at the hands of aliens, or "visitors," as he prefers to call them. In *Communion* he describes how he was kidnapped from his cabin in upstate New York and told by the aliens, almost in passing, "You are our chosen one." He is also subjected to a variety of humiliatingly intimate examinations; at one point a female "visitor" examining him remarks, "Jesus, is that your penis?" (the alien's choice of oath seems surprising, but perhaps she's addressing him) and later asks "Can you be harder?"

There's a considerable amount of pseudo-philosophical padding in *Communion* which, if anything, is even more difficult to take than the close encounters; at least the aliens are funny:

Whoever or whatever the visitors are, their activities go far beyond a mere study of mankind. They are involved with us on very deep levels, playing in the band of dream, weaving imagination and reality together until they begin to seem what they probably are – different aspects of a single continuum. To really begin (sic) to perceive the visitors adequately it is going to be necessary to invent new disciplines of vision, one that combines the mystic's freedom of imagination with the substantial intellectual rigor of the scientist.

When Whitley Strieber splits an infinitive it stays split.

Transformation tells of further contacts; his son, it turns out, has also had "abduction experiences" and Strieber is given a chilling warning by the visitors: eat chocolate and you die. We hear how Whitley has also been having out of body experiences where he visits people in the media in their sleep (honestly), although it's not clear how this relates to the visitors, if at all. In between being abducted and travelling on the astral plane, the real surprise is that he had the time and energy to write a sequel to *Communion*.

We are not deprived of Strieber's reflections on his experiences in *Transformation*, and they are as uplifting as those in the earlier book:

The visitors are sweeping up from where we buried them under layers of denial and false assurance to deliver what is truly a message from the beyond. There is something more to us and our universe, and it is rich with the potential of the unknown.

It will be incredibly hard for us to achieve real relationships with the visitors. But also, I can tell you from experience that there will be wonder.

There will be great wonder.

Both books helpfully provide an address to which donations can be sent to assist the Communion Foundation (Prop: W. Strieber, Esq) in its further study of the visitors.

It all seems rather reminiscent of another second-rate writer with a shaky grip on truth and reality, although presumably since good old L. Ron passed over (or whatever it is Scientists do) he's even better at out-of-body trips than Whitley.

Majestic continues his obsession with aliens. It is based upon a "true case" of alien contact which took place in 1947, when a spaceship crashed in the desert of New Mexico near the Roswell Army Air Field. After initial confusion the government covered this incident up, claiming that what had crashed was a new kind of weather balloon. Strieber uses these "events" as the basis of his novel, told in the first person by a fictional journalist who uncovers the truth via a dying CIA official. The journalist is a pretty nasty individual who appears

to take pleasure in the CIA figure's cancer, seeing it as some sort of cosmic retribution for his sins; he is also given to self-dramatizing and self-pitying outbursts: "Even if I don't go to jail, I have become a martyr to my issue. My career is dead."

However bad the characterization may be, and none of the characters are believable (but they're all dislikable), it pales into insignificance in comparison with the dialogue, which ranges from the execrable to the farcically inappropriate. A group of hard-boiled soldiers trade insults, the killer line being "Fuck you, you big puff"; better still though is a passage when one of the impressively masculine soldiers is discovered in *flagrante* in his twenty-year-old true-love's bedroom by her father:

At first [her father] did not understand what he was seeing. Wallowing like savages in a heap of dresses were two completely naked human beings... Such was the extremity of their passion that they moved in a blur. It never even occurred to him that his beloved daughter lay abnegated before him, not until they expended themselves and became suddenly as quiet as thieves.

'Katherine O'Mally, oh Lord! And you, you Army tramp!'

Jim couldn't think... 'Mr O'Mally,' he said in what sounded to him like the voice of a twelve-year-old, 'I can explain.'

'Explain! Get out of my house, you home-wrecker! How dare you sully my only daughter! Oh, Katie Kate, are you hurt, my dearest?'

The dialogue becomes even more ludicrous, but unfortunately I can't quote it all here.

The rest of *Majestic* isn't nearly as entertaining; it's presented in a documentary style, and Strieber is careful to avoid letting the reader know which parts are fact and which fiction; this is initially irritating, but well before the end of the novel it's difficult to imagine anyone caring.

Perhaps the interview itself would shed some light on how someone who writes like this could be so successful?

In comparison with his interview technique, however, Strieber's books are models of well-balanced rationality: meeting him turned out to be an extremely disconcerting experience.

Majestic is not about Whitley; does he plan to write about his own experiences of the visitors again? "There won't be a further volume. I have a great deal I would like to say, but I will only write another book if there is an official admission that something has really happened, or the visitors' presence became so obvious it couldn't be denied." But is he still in contact with the visitors? "I have a relationship with them. I just don't wish to talk about it."

The only reason the Roswell incident (the subject of *Majestic*, when the aliens wrote off one of their space-buggies) isn't known of world-wide is that the CIA mounted a massive cover-up operation; this and other close encounters have been kept from us by the masterly trick of ridiculing such stories.

The *New York Times* and the US military-industrial complex are in on it too. To my shame, I discover that British TV is also part of the conspiracy: "I was on a programme here a few months ago called *After Dark* where they ambushed me; they lied to me, the producers... they put me on with seven hostile sceptics, I mean it was seven against one." Uri Geller has also suffered unfairly at the hands of unbelievers: "He's dismissed, but I have been to a party in California where children could do it; I have had in my own hands a spoon that turned to the consistency of butter, that I made into little s-shapes." Just the spoons? Must have been pretty weak stuff.

Strieber gets very angry about people doubting him: in *Communion* he remarks that mocking those who claim to have been abducted by aliens "is as ugly as laughing at rape victims." As I discovered, he's not too keen on having the world according to Whitley Strieber questioned too closely either:

W.S.: "How does science explain the fact that so many people who have abduction experiences end up suffering from allergies?"

Me: "But isn't it true that allergies aren't very well understood? I believe it's possible that a range of allergy-sufferers have their symptoms rooted in psychological circumstances, so isn't it possible that the claims of abduction and the allergic conditions have a similar psychological cause?"

Pause. "I don't know what to say to you. It's like talking to a wall."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's as if you can't hear me."

"Well I think that's a little unfair. I asked a reasonable question about allergies, a subject which you'd raised..."

"No you didn't. Your questioning arises from a group of certitudes. It's very different talking to you from talking to a normal person. You see, most journalists are all the same. I could tell you were a journalist the moment I met you [a brilliant feat of intuition, clearly unconnected with the fact that the

interview took place in *The Oxford Times* offices], you journalists just mock everything..." He tails off into speechlessness at my journalistic mendacity.

"Well I'm actually an English and Philosophy teacher in a boarding school, I'm not a journalist."

Pause.

"Well, anyway..."

He then tells me how my attitude would change if, as he has done, I had talked to the many parents whose children have been abducted (but returned again before they can inform the authorities). The aliens, it seems, are keen on children.

Strieber is particularly eloquent on the sf genre. Tom Disch "is a bitter, jealous failure," Ian Watson a "relentlessly turgid and secondary author in every respect," and anyway, genre categories are invented by publishers to control writers who make them nervous. He has a point on the last issue, of course, but I guess I'd be pretty nervous of someone who claimed to be the chosen one of a group of interplanetary child-molesters.

However, he has good arguments to back up his close encounter claims: a brain-scan has shown that he has dents in his brain, a result of the visitors sticking probes up his nose.

At the end of the interview, his last in Britain, I wish him a good flight home, but it is obvious he has more to say.

"Anyway, how can you be a teacher with attitudes like yours?"

So, how did someone who seemingly can't write dialogue or tell a convincing story, and comes across as a hostile paranoiac with messianic pretensions, ever achieve such a large reputation? It doesn't seem likely that he could have charmed a publisher into taking him on.

His first book *The Wolfen* (1980) is now out of print in Britain; the copy I used came from the local library, and I was disturbed by the chocolate and blood stains on almost every page: perhaps they were left by someone who had been visited by the aliens and had disregarded their warning about chocolate consumption.

The real shock came when I read *The Wolfen*, though: it's surprisingly good. Not a masterpiece, not terribly original, but nevertheless, quite enjoyable. There is a tendency to allow the main characters to wander off into badly-written soliloquizing, but the basic story idea – that there are intelligent wolf-like creatures living in New York and feeding on the population – is well-executed. It's less of a genre novel, and more of a police-procedural piece as the two principal characters, a hard-bitten mysoginistic police detective and his female side-kick, pursue the *Wolfen*, despite the rest of

of the world's disbelief.

Admittedly the characters are wooden and the relationships between them clichéd, but it doesn't suffer from the dialogue faults of *Majestic*, and it isn't preoccupied with sexual humiliation or inflated by flights of second-rate philosophical fancy like *Communion* and *Transformation*. It's more believable than these two "true stories" as well, although this is admittedly saying very little.

What it does have in common with these three, however, is the idea that there are aliens in our midst, and that this knowledge is kept from us by a combination of a refusal to face up to the unusual, and a deliberate cover-up on the part of the authorities. The hero and heroine try to warn people but are ignored and ridiculed for their troubles, rather as Whitley has been in his selfless attempts to tell the world about the visitors, although in *The Wolfen* the main characters don't have the luxury of being ridiculed via million-dollar advances or ignored by over-exposure on American TV chat-shows.

One doesn't have to wade too far into what might be termed his literary career before Whitley's fixation upon sexual indignity and his linkage of sex and pain begins to emerge: in his short story "Pain" (which, as Tom Disch has pointed out, looks suspiciously like a short try-out for *Communion*) Strieber's narrator tells us:

I wanted to know not only about prostitution but also about the various perversions that attach themselves to it. There are sexual desires so exploitative that people will not gratify them without being paid even in our exploitative society. These have to do for the most part with pain and death. For death is connected to sexuality – witness the spider. Who hasn't wondered what the male spider feels, submitting at the same time to the ecstasy of coitus and the agony of death?

Well, I haven't for one; but as Whitley has pointed out, I'm several walls short of a house, so I guess I'm no guide to what's normal.

His distasteful attitude to sex also shows in other pre-*Communion* novels, particularly *The Night Church* (1984) which features the violent rape of a young woman on a church altar (exploitation? what exploitation?) and an interrogation featuring a blow torch applied to the subject's crotch ("his bowels exploded inside him...hot steam rushed up his throat and scorched his mouth and nose").

The Night Church is concerned with a dark and evil organization concealed at the heart of everyday life; once again knowledge of this group is limited to a small number whose warnings are not heeded...

Catmagic (1986) is less offensive but deals with yet another secret organiza-

tion in humanity's midst. This time it's witches, and in the introduction to the book we find that Strieber's conspiracy theory argument is now blossoming (albeit along bizarre lines):

There are a few people who distort Witchcraft and mock its ancient rituals in ceremonies that glorify evil. I met two such people. They turned out to be associated with another religion. They were calling themselves Witches and engaging...in rituals involving dead goats in an effort to discredit Wicca.

Not only does *Catmagic* mark the continuing development of the paranoia so prevalent in his later books, it also features "mysterious small beings" who, according to Strieber, "seem to be an unconscious rendering of them [the visitors]."

Catmagic also features a professor who is keen on killing things and people so he can bring them back to life – I'm sure Strieber is right to attack scientists who carry out experiments on animals, but we're hardly in the realms of startlingly original character creation when it comes to mad professors.

Immediately prior to *Communion* Strieber collaborated with James Kunetka on a couple of novels, *Warday* (1984) and *Nature's End* (1986). *Warday*, takes the unoriginal idea of a limited nuclear exchange between the USA and the Soviet Union and explores its consequences. Set in the near future, it is presented in the form of interviews with characters who have survived this semi-holocaust; the interviews are interspersed with copies of official documents and details from opinion polls conducted in this post-war USA. This documentary approach, dealing with the stuff of fiction in a factual manner, is matched in *Majestic* and was no doubt useful practice for the writing of *Communion*.

As a novel, *Warday* is devoid of merit: its premise is startlingly ordinary, its characterization non-existent and its telling flat and uninteresting. Unlike *Majestic*, for example, it's not even possible to find it funny. Even the account of the origin of the conflict which leads to the events of *Warday* is simplistic and morally innocent Americans deploy an anti-missile system, prior, of course, to the intended dismantling of their own offensive weapons systems; the unstable and irrational Soviets refuse to use diplomatic channels (they allow the hotline telephone to ring unanswered) and launch a nuclear attack on several American cities, which is promptly answered in similar fashion. Both sides then swiftly run out of steam (or fission).

Surprisingly, Strieber is proud of *Warday*, and told me that "Just in recent years papers have been published



showing that the *Warday* scenario is the correct scenario...the science behind that book is more true even than we thought."

Nature's End follows *Warday* and is pretty much more of the same. This time pollution rather than war is the problem and millions are dying from their toxic environment and from hunger. Again, the narrative is made up from a variety of perspectives in a semi-documentary manner, although we do at least find a story this time. Another feature *Nature's End* shares with *Warday* is its overtones of xenophobia: in the first novel it was the Russians; in this one it's an Indian, Dr Gupta Singh (a good un-American name) the leader of Depopulationist International, whose solution to the planet's problem is the voluntary suicide of one third of the world's population – obvious really, isn't it? Needless to say, the sinister Singh (I don't think he's described as a wily oriental) has sufficient charisma to make this plan seem reasonable. Of course, he must be stopped and Strieber and Kunetka know the man who might be able to do it.

It's clear that by the time he gets to *Communion* Strieber has rehearsed most of its major themes: "aliens" in our midst in *The Wolfen*; *The Night Church* and *Catmagic*, and knowledge of these aliens possessed by a select and heroic few; "mysterious small beings" in "Pain" and *Catmagic*; clichéd sub-B-movie characterization; conspiracies everywhere, it seems; and, stylistically, an increasing emphasis upon a "documentary" approach and the consequent attempts to blur the boundary between fact and fiction.

To be fair, he anticipates and tries to answer this point in his introduction to the reprint of *Catmagic*, when he claims that the features which it has in common with *Communion* are unconsciously "derived from my inner understanding of the meaning of the "visitors," who had been visiting him for a long time by then, although he did not know it. This defence seems dubious, however, and it is not hard to find a more obvious explanation.

Even if we ignore *Communion* and *Transformation* and concentrate on his "literary" output (not a course likely to recommend itself to his accountant) we find a preoccupation with concealed presences and conspiracies.

No doubt Strieber would say in defence of his concern with this theme that there are more things in heaven and earth etc, and that truth is stranger than fiction; certainly this is the impression he gave me in his interview.

I'm sure he's right about this, but if he really thinks he's challenging our understanding of the universe with a series of B-movie plot rip-offs he is displaying a startling paucity of imagination. Sadly, I'm sure that's exactly what he thinks he's doing.

If we disregard the effect of his abduction writings, his popularity may partially be explained by the appeal that the "enemies within" type of literature has for many – there is a rich vein of paranoia just waiting to be tapped and the setting of such novels is an irrelevance.

Strieber's books answer the double hope of the inadequate, that there is more to reality than we think, but that this "more" is essentially benign. He makes the world seem a more manageable place to this type of reader by presenting a comforting strangeness in terms which can be easily assimilated: aliens, mad scientists and witches are all part of the folklore of the mid-twentieth century, for example.

That his writing at times displays an unhealthy and misogynistic view of sex is, in marketing terms at least, simply a bonus.

His objection to genre categories surely arises out of a recognition of these truths: precisely because his settings and themes are so mundane he could not hope to be taken seriously if his books were marketed as science fiction – on the whole, this is a relatively sophisticated sector of the market, and the typical sf reader is unlikely to be impressed with Strieber's preoccupations. In the UK at least this seems to have been recognized and *Majestic* was published by Macdonald rather than under its increasingly active science-fiction imprint, Orbit. Despite Strieber's disdain for publishers and their categories, he owes them a great deal.

However, whatever the merits or otherwise of his books we can be confident of one thing: if Whitley really is the aliens' "chosen one" then presumably we can one day expect to be contacted by a particularly bad-tempered and unimaginative race of beings with an aversion to chocolate and a fondness for children: it's a chilling thought.

(Brendan Wignall)

Despatches from the UFO Wars

David Langford

"...And in the studio now we have a real live sci-fi author! Yes, he's come zooming down from space in his flying saucer, har har, to give us all the latest galactic news about little green men, har har, and to plug his new book of sci-fi high jinks called, lemme see, called 1984! So tell me George, you must be into UFOs, what did you think of, um, Uri Geller?"

Repeated doses of this kind of thing, administered by the skilled disc jockeys of many a local radio station, have left the average sf author with a tendency to snarl at the mere mention of UFO research. Though sf and UFOs are about equally played for laughs by the less respectable media, we somehow fail to feel a kinship.

Nor do we notice the finer distinctions apparent to those on the inside. Just as we ourselves can sense a certain dividing line between, say, Gene Wolfe and L. Ron Hubbard, so UFOlogy embraces a spectrum of thought from the scientifically intriguing to the totally dippy. And at the moment, its internal struggles make the bickering of sf fans and authors seem remarkably trivial.

I wandered backwards into the UFO scene more than a decade ago, with my spoof book *An Account of a Meeting with Denizens of Another World, 1871* (1979). This presented a fictional narrative about a Victorian "close encounter," embedded in a learned commentary which – my favourite touch – was frequently very sceptical about the story. It was great fun, for me at least, and I laughed all the way to the remainder shelf. By the mid-80s, despite being retailed in a couple of sensationalist UFO compilations and exposed in *Private Eye* magazine, the book was forgotten. Almost.

This is where I must be careful with my words. It hadn't occurred to me that when he wrote his trenchant and funny piece on Whitley Strieber in *Interzone* 25, Thomas Disch might actually be risking a lawsuit. Yet he dwelt briefly on the remarkable coincidence that Strieber had been looking into *Science and the UFOs* by Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington, which describes a "classic" UFO experience, mere hours before having the closely similar experience which was so

profitably immortalized in his *Communion*.

Randles, a professional UFO author and researcher, made the mistake of joking about this sequence of events when speaking on the radio. Having been sent a tape of the programme by his UFOlogical colleague Stanton Friedman, Strieber immediately threatened a libel action. Randles lacked the funds to resist and had to grovel in public. Nobody messes with Whitley Strieber.

It was, by coincidence, Jenny Randles who noticed something familiar about certain pages of Strieber's new novel (fiction, but purporting to be closely based on a true incident), *Majestic*. The news reached me through an intermediary: two pages of this heavily hyped epic are a detailed rehash – a condensation rather in the *Readers Digest* manner – of the central narrative in my own UFO spoof.

I must say that, although I lack huge riches for lawsuits against anyone who irritates me, I would have enjoyed a grovelling public apology from Whitley Strieber. Instead, I merely received an assurance from his US publishers that – by lifting the story not directly from my book but from a gosh-wow compilation which paraphrased it without permission from me – Strieber behaved entirely properly despite not getting permission from anybody. Furthermore, they said in reply to a slightly malicious request, he and they would not grant permission for me to quote the version of my story which appears without my permission in *Majestic*. (I suppose I could ask if they'd let me paraphrase it...) As for an apology, or maybe even a permission fee, forget it: to offer either would be to admit liability, and of course we can't have that. I can only hope for a credit on the next edition's copyright page.

The UFO world is complicated. Only after all this, and after writing about my involvement in *Majestic*, did I learn that I might have been walking on thin ice...when Randles explained to me the perils of so much as hinting that Strieber could ever have been influenced by any other story whatever. She also let slip that she was again being sued, this time in earnest,

by Strieber's aforementioned pal Stanton Friedman.

I asked why, and shortly afterwards began to chew the carpet in rage.

It seems that the major division in UFOlogy today is between what might be called the British and American schools of thought...which is not to say that the British approach is devoid of US supporters, or vice versa. Randles and the Brits favour a psychological approach to the famous experiences of close encounters and UFO "abductions" – not so much to explain them away as in the hope that like other anomalous mental states (lucid dreaming, "out of the body" experiences, etc.) they could offer insights into how human brains work.

The American school, I rather regret to say, prefers grittily physical abductions by physical aliens piloting physical UFOs, and has a tendency to invoke global conspiracy theories based on shoddy documentation. This goes back to the old story (forming the plot of *Majestic*) about the 1947 "crashed flying saucer" in New Mexico. Secret committees are supposed to have presided over autopsies on little green bodies and conducted experiments on aliens' fondness for strawberry ice cream. Every US administration since the 1940s is supposed to have continued the cover-up of this earth-shattering news, just as they so successfully hid Watergate. And so on.

This wild-seeming stuff appears to be largely based on a lot of "leaked" documents dealing with the secret committee, known as the "MJ-12" or "Majestic-12" papers: hence Strieber's novel title. In the American or extra-terrestrial school of UFOlogy, these occupy the holy position which in another place is given over to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. They are heavily disputed for a variety of reasons – one, for example, has a Presidential signature detectably photocopied from a genuine and publicly accessible autograph.

(All this provides a thick veneer of daftness over the apparent fact that something *did* crash in the New Mexico desert in 1947, and excludes discussion of the boring possibility of, say, some early and secret US research into German rocket technology.)

I think my prejudices are showing. The MJ-12 material seems made to order for the kind of two-faced newspaper story which feeds on Colossal Sensation and simultaneously, self-protectively, makes fun of the subject matter. It's also ideal fodder for the loonies. Visiting the USA in 1987, Randles was presented with boggling dossiers, like the one about how the US government had done a deal with the alien hordes, agreeing a formal quote for the number of people to be abducted by UFOs in each following year.

All this has not helped more sober researchers, who thanks to the MJ-12 frenzy have found the credibility of their subject at an all-time low...no matter how unsensational their own theories might be.

Their plight is reminiscent of that nightmare scene with a reporter at an sf convention. "Science fiction," one says earnestly, "can be a literature of ideas and extrapolation; an unparalleled medium for social satire; a fertile compost for the stuff of myth. You mustn't assume we're all..." Whereupon someone in an ill-fitting Darth Vader costume stampedes past, shouting "Kill! Kill!" while projecting a murderous barrage from his bubble gun, and the reporter most certainly does assume that we are all.

So much for the UFOlogical background. The debate between what I've been calling British and American UFOlogy came to a head in Manchester last October, when Stanton Friedman, US scientist and apostle of the MJ-12 faith, was scheduled to hold a revivalist meeting about all this dubious evidence for forty-odd years of extraterrestrial intervention. Jenny Randles, who lives in the area, irately told the *Manchester Evening News* about the harm she reckoned had been done to serious UFOlogy by – well, by all the above. This proved to be a mistake.

By the time the newspaper had finished jazzing them up, Randles's condemnations of US excesses were distorted so that they could just about be taken, by someone willing enough to be offended, as personal attacks on Friedman and Co. For example, a comment about the authenticity of the MJ-12 papers became, in the reporter's creative hands: "A meeting featuring an American expert on the subject of 'crashed UFOs' was condemned today as 'about as factual as a Steven Spielberg movie'." Is it libellous to call a meeting fictional?

Friedman and the organizer of the Manchester meeting issued writs on the basis of the newspaper story... even though Randles had at once complained to the paper about being misrepresented. It is pretty evident where the litigants' wrath is focused: the

reporter isn't being sued, the newspaper is being asked for £500, and Jenny Randles for £10,000.

Friedman asserts that his international scientific reputation has been damaged by this small article in a local newspaper – though he didn't mind being prestigiously splashed, some weeks later, all over the *Sunday Sport*. (Note for Americans: a paper like the *National Enquirer* but substantially less staid and dignified.) To my jaundiced gaze, his attitude doesn't look very scientific.

I am a lapsed scientist myself. In a small way I once took part in scientific debates, saying "I dispute this claim" and thereby implying that the other chap had mucked up experimental procedures, had misinterpreted results, or was simply fibbing. Now I see that this normal give-and-take of scientific dispute can in theory lead to a libel suit for impugning someone's professional competence or integrity. Of course science would grind to a halt if every such case went to the courts, but what's a little inconvenience like that by comparison with the awesome reputation of Stanton Friedman?

"This," his supporters have been heard to gloat, "will be the Scopes trial of UFOlogy." My own understanding of the 1925 Scopes trial was that those who used the law in hope of silencing their opponents – who in that case were teachers of Darwinian evolution – ended up looking very silly.

Wearing my other hat as an sf writer, I too have spoken to the Press and subsequently regretted it. It is thoroughly dismaying to think that anyone can be sued for large sums on the basis of a journalist's creative distortions.

"*Interzone*," I imagine myself explaining, "is a fiction magazine and is published monthly." In due course the story appears: "Hard-hitting David Langford lashed out today and blasted the claimed monthly schedule of sci-fi mag *Interzone* as 'pure fiction'." I write hastily to editor David Pringle, saying I'm extremely sorry about what appeared and that it wasn't at all what I'd said. "Ha ha," he retorts as his solicitors prepare the writ for defamation, "you have apologized! That's an admission of liability!" Incredibly, this too is a fairly close paraphrase of one early exchange in the Randles/Friedman affair.

Along with various writer colleagues, I've grown angry at this seeming misuse of the courts to suppress debates of what are claimed to be scientific issues. In April 1990, Paul Barnett (better known to sf readers as "John Grant") and I started a fighting fund to help contest it. This, in homage to the legendary libel defence funds of *Private Eye* magazine, is called "MJ-Balls." Although, as I write, the appeal

has barely been launched, contributions and expressions of support have come from several sf notables, including John Brunner, Ramsey Campbell, Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, Bob Shaw and Ian Watson. Any further help from *Interzone* readers would be hugely appreciated.

Meanwhile, I've heard from another British specialist in outspoken comment about the fringes of science (name withheld by request), who has received an initial stropic letter from the solicitors of someone called Uri Geller. Here we go again.

David Langford (born 1953) is a physicist (unfrocked), author, critic, computer person and collector of Hugo awards. He recommends pages 46 and 47 (only) of *Majestic* by Whitley Strieber, published in the USA by Putnam and in Britain by MacDonald at £12.95. The defence fund is quite genuine, and cheques made out to "MJ-Balls" will be gratefully received at 17 Polsloe Road, Exeter, Devon, EX1 2HL.

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CORRECTION

In last month's issue, we quoted a letter from Miles Hadfield in which he commended various books ("Interface," top of column three, page four). Item 10 in his list was given as "*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Darkness Visible* by Ralph Ellison (tie)." The author of the second book is, of course, **William Golding**. Apologies: it was our mistake, not Miles Hadfield's.

The Allure

Richard Calder

It was the year when dermaplastic became the *dernier cri* in fashion, and when Ungaro's latest muse, Babette Bonheur, modelled the *apache* collection in Paris. To the music of *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, Babette idled down the catwalk, her outfit – a living culture of collagen and elastin fibres – clinging like grafted flesh. She was stunning: a beauty from the slums of Kinshasa, black as an African night. I raised my camera, the motordrive maching-gunning each pose, inflection of hip, each studied insolence.

The *apache* look was the apotheosis of Ungaro's *bordello chic*. Vertiginous hemlines, Breton jerseys, spidersilk nets – all the props of the French vaudeville dance – were keynotes of his show. Babette saw me; smiled. Then a male model appeared, a black pimp who, after distracting her with a fainted slap to her cheek, dragged her the length of the catwalk and into the *cabine*. Before they disappeared, focusing for a close-up, the motordrive zinging like an insect choir, I had thought: Yes, that man – why does the mantle of the thug hold, for him, so little irony? Applause, applause, and beneath the lights, a fantastic litter of roses.

After the show, backstage, in the tented courtyard of the Louvre, I looked for Babette amid a huddle of buyers, celebrities and mannequins. Prevailing upon the *directrice*, I was ushered to where Babette held court, her long, austere Giacometti-like head emerging above a knot of admirers.

"Hello, Didi."

"How's life, Babette? Blonde on blonde?"

"O, it is very *apache*, Didi."

"My poor martyr." I kissed her cheek.

Babette had changed into a dermatoid bodysuit, matching thighboots (trimmed with chain), skull-cap and *faux* jewels. Customized melanocytes gave her ensemble a desertblonde pigmentation, so she seemed an embalmed princess, unearthed from crueler, more civilized times. The man who had partnered Babette on the catwalk turned his back on us, retreating into the sanctuary of his own second skin.

"Who is he?" I asked, as he pimp-rolled into the crowd.

"You don't know? The new Belmondo, they say. A black Belmondo." Babette was flustered. "His name is Saint Loup. But let's not talk about..." The *directrice* had taken her arm.

"Sorry, Didi. I must throw Baba to the lions."

And she was gone, as swift as a year in the history of fashion.

I couldn't sleep. Pirouetting in whorls of darkness, Babette and her surly blackamoor acted out their mime of "gangster and his girl" incessantly behind my eyes. About four or five o'clock I left my

hotel in the Beaux Quartiers and drifted through a Paris of shop signs and headlights, white on black, black on white; a Paris doused in rain. Babette looked down from a thousand rain-drenched hoardings. As Ungaro's muse she had launched his new perfume, *Virgin Martyr*. Colour-drained as the city, black on white, white on black, Babette writhed naked on her cross. Beneath her, a party of dinner-jacketed men rolled dice for the scent bottle at her feet. The *titulus* read *La Reine des Parfums*. I remembered how difficult the composition had been; how the ensuing controversy, the Papal bulls, the firebombings, had brought Babette and me fame. Now the campaign was over; the posters, peeling. And above Paris the gods of notoriety wept.

As if startled from a dream, I found myself in the Rue du Faubourg-St-Honoré. I was soaked through, shivering, cold and adrift in the void. Ungaro beckoned. My nose pressed to the window, I warmed myself on embers of autumn yellow and ochre, russet, auburn and Venetian red. The boutique acknowledged my presence. Gowns and frocks rippled on their hangers, hemlines curling flirtatiously. How often had I celebrated this carnival of trivia, these fripperies that consoled a frost-bitten heart? How often, at dinner parties, I had said: "If we want to enjoy fashions, we must not look upon them as dead things: they must be pictured as full of the life and vitality of the beautiful women who wear them"? And what were they, now, these living dresses and gowns? What were they without Babette? Flesh for dead souls; gaudy shrouds for guests at a latter-day Trimalchio's feast. A masquerade of the void.

O Babette – New York, London, Paris, Milan – why could I never say "I love you"?

Something moved. A shadow lengthened, foreshortened, dissolved. Two shadows. And the racks of exquisitely cut tissue culture – somatic textiles patterned with exotic dermatoglyphics – divested themselves, as if obeying the invisible hands of a black theatre's puppeteers. A headlight scythed across the showroom, and a face, dark, beautiful and frightened, was briefly illuminated.

Babette? Before I could think about what I was doing, I had smiled and rapped my knuckles against the glass. But it was the "black Belmondo" who returned my salute, stepping centre stage and transfixing me with the dark phallic eye of a handgun.

Time and the world imploded. Far, far away, at the ends of the earth, and slowly, very slowly, Babette stepped forward, her mouth a rictus; the alarm bell that had begun to ring obscured her cry; and slowly, very slowly, its clamour introduced another protagonist. A Pinkerton guard – a telerobot run, perhaps, from a surveillance office several kilometres away –

had awoken. It trained its camcorder eyes on the intruders, ghosting the movements of its human operative and radioing a warning.

Saint Loup turned, casually loosing a shell into the sentinel's armoured head; the machine took a step backwards; another shot; its mouth opened and a forked tongue quivered between steel-blue lips. Grabbing Babette, Saint Loup pulled her towards the window, lifting his gun as if to smash some egress. The tongue flicked across the room, imbedding itself in Babette's bodysuit, electric venom knocking her to the floor. The gun cracked impotently against the plate-glass.

"Babette!" I cried, and ran across the street to a shopfront half-stripped of scaffolding. Picking up my weapon, I charged Ungaro like a battle-maddened lancer, my spear aimed at the hairline fault that threatened the window's inviolacy. The glass exploded; I went through, stumbled, collapsed. Looking up through a veil of blood, I saw the Pinkerton – three metres of scaffolding skewering it through its mouth – lying in a soft fleshy bed of couture. And I too – after disengaging the taser from Babette's clothes, and witnessing, with outraged disgust, the perfidious rent in my thigh disclose my body's wine-dark secrets – I too heard oblivion call my name. It cooed temptingly into my ear. And I lay back and thought: Mmm, why not?

"It is the allure, Didi. We are slaves to the allure."

"Shit – what's he know about the allure?"

"Didi is an artist."

"Nails some chick to a cross. Takes her photo. An artist!"

"Saint Loup, you are a beast! He's hurt."

"So why bring him along? We got your artist bleeding all over my car."

"Don't move, Didi."

"Périphérique. No police. On our way."

"Didi, I'm so sorry. But the allure. The allure!"

"Forget it, bitch-cake. He can't hear you."

White room. Light room. Rain-washed pastel of a pavement artist who, after achieving this perfection, died. Here I had become, almost, a dream of my own dreaming. Almost, at rest.

Sometimes the voices would return. But when I opened my eyes there were only the plain white-washed walls, the meagre furniture and *djellabas*, the window beyond which lay a cloudless sky of deepest, purest blue.

And then one day there was Babette.

She was all surface and plane, like the photograph I had taken of her for *Nakayoshi Deluxe*, introducing Ungaro's "dandy look" to Japan. She was an apparitional macaroni, a transexual mannequin in snug-fitting breeches, riding boots, cut-away hunting coat and a cravat so elaborately knotted that it made it impossible for her to turn or lower her head. She was Mlle Brummell.

"Your fever's broken, Didi. Eat –" And she brought a spoonful of thick meaty broth to my lips. "You haven't touched anything for days." The broth seared my throat; a euphoria stoked my brain. Congolese music rose through the floorboards.



Illustrations by Barbara Hills

"Goutte d'Or?"

"We're further north. But never mind about that. You must get strong." Beneath the sheets I ran my hand along my thigh and discovered a ribbed column of stitches.

"Babette, what sort of trouble are you in? Are we in?"

"I'm so sorry, Didi. About all this. But I can't stop now. The clothes... they have stolen my heart. Feel!" And she took hold of my hand and placed it on her plum-coloured waistcoat. The material was dermatoid. It palpitated beneath my touch, its sensory fibres relaying a voluptuous message through a peripheral nervous system that was hardwired to Babette's own. She sighed. "The allure, Didi..."

"Shit – I told you he don't know about the allure." Saint Loup had entered, a sardonic welcome-to-the-criminal-world sort of grin cracking his face.

"No," I said, "I suppose I don't."

He ran his hands down his silken lapels. "Me and my clothes. Let me tell you. We're brothers. Sym-bions. We can't live without each other. Man, I am my clothes." He wrapped his arms about his chest. "Their receptor cells give you something, man. Perfect style. You walk tall. Shit – some of these new threads even got a fucking cortex." He turned to Babette, his face suddenly crushed beneath a weight of ennui. "Bitch-cake, why am I explaining this to our convalescent? We don't need him."

"He saved us from the Pinkerton?"

"Shit – that man-machine?" He went to the window and lit a cigarette.

"Don't take any notice of Saint Loup, Didi."

"But why steal?" I asked. "You don't need to. Both of you have money."

"A man-machine. You think I can't handle a fucking man-machine?"

"It's not for ourselves, Didi. It's for the King. The King of *la Sape*!"

"That's enough!" Saint Loup ground his cigarette into the boards.

"The King is going to save the world. And then all will be allure. Allure and ambiances!" Saint Loup was stamping his feet and remonstrating; but the sound track had broken; the frames stuttered. Before I passed out, Babette's voice cut in: "He will make a wardrobe of the world!" And I remember thinking O my, these two icons of style: dermatoid junkies, both. Then the room, dissolving and reforming, cool and opalescent, ushered me into a world of sweet, sweet exhaustion where my thoughts were as nothing. Nothing at all.

As my strength returned so the little white-washed cell no longer instilled in me its dreamy complaisance; and the memory of my early morning walk, Ungaro, the telerobot, my charge into looking-glass land, came to disturb my rest. Night-times, listening to a far-away police siren that seemed like the melancholy cry of a country to which I would never return, I knew my life as a glittering child of the *aube de millénium* was over. I had few regrets. Babette shared my exile. And though she was not mine (what hold did Saint Loup have over her?) I began to construct expansive, romantic scenarios of our life together "on the run".

After feeding me, Babette would sit by my bedside. We would talk clothes. "Flesh of my flesh," she would say, addressing her dermatoid apparel, sometimes retro New Look or A-Line, sometimes Space Baby or Buffalo. "Super-lycras, polyurethanes – they're out, out. Dermaplastic is the apocalypse of fashion."

For a long time she deflected all questions pertaining to her co-conspirator and the mysterious "King of *la Sape*." Then, one day, after an angry exchange downstairs, she burst into my room and said: "We have been summoned." I looked at her questioningly. "To the land of sapeurdom," she added. "To the court of the sapeur King." I did not interrupt. I could tell she was about to unburden herself.

"It was Saint Loup who introduced us. Saint Loup would take me to clubs like *Mambo* and *La Plantation*. Saint Loup was a big man. His film *La Puissance* had just been released. His friends were all boys from Zaire and the Congo. Musicians, mostly. Poor boys trying to strike it rich in Paris. After a few drinks they would talk of *la Sape*. It was like a religion to them. The latest clothes, the latest walk, the latest talk. The latest ambiances. Saint Loup was their hero. But Saint Loup spoke of one who was greater than he. A King of Style. A man who bestowed the miracle of *couture* upon the poor. It was only when I met the King that I knew..." She bowed her head and fiddled with the crucifix between her breasts. "How empty my life was. He saved me, Didi. He can save us all. He teaches us that you are what you wear. That you can be what you want to be by dressing the part. That you can become your clothes."

So this was Babette's gambit against the void: some fashion guru – and Paris now was lousy with them – a celebrant of surface and plane, had become, for her, a means of denying the emptiness of her life. For how many years had I been equally served by a camera and a roll of film? We each had our drugs.

"And now," said Babette, "it is time to go."

A gun muzzle in my back (unnecessary; I would have followed Babette anywhere), I was half-carried by Saint Loup down three flights of stairs and into the awaiting Citroën. The car's leopard-skin upholstery was mottled with blood. "Should charge you for that, man," muttered Saint Loup.

We were all dressed *apache*. The fibres of my ensemble had begun to insinuate themselves into my pores as soon as I had dressed, my ascending nerve tract channelling their supersensual impulses to my brain. Clothes and flesh merged; neurons fired; and the night-streets, white on black, black on white, assaulted me with dreams. A sheep's head in the window of a Hallal butcher whispered verses from the *Rubáiyát*; a lost African tribe danced before the juke-box of a nearby café; and a ravaged poster for *Virgin Martyr* – torn from the pages of a medieval manuscript – solicited the world's tears. We pulled away, the fleapit hotel that had been our bolthole now a Moorish palace and shimmering like a nocturnal mirage.

Babette drove. I sat next to her, Saint Loup's gun occasionally icing my neck. On the dashboard was a still of Eddie Constantine from *Alphaville*. Life was vision and texture, music and scent.

"Do you understand now?" said Babette. "It gives us everything. And we are its faithful." Her legs,



encased in spidersilk nets, momentarily brushed against my own, couture coupling with couture. In sartorial oneness I saw, heard, felt as Babette. I knew her loneliness, how she clove to the bright-spinning, effervescent world of her amplified senses so desperately.

We drove south into the immigrant ghetto of the Goutte d'Or and parked in the Rue de Suez.

We sat at a long table of African mahogany. The ball gown that was serving drinks – a parlourmaid of sorts – fluttered about my chair. As it bent over to offer me a liqueur I peeped inside the décolletage to seek the mechanics of its animation. There was nothing but satin finery. “It’s a beautiful dress,” I said at last, breaking the silence that had lasted throughout the meal.

General Kitendi smiled. “She was a beautiful woman. Once. Now she is her more beautiful clothes. She has become her clothes...”

Kitendi – “The King of *la Sape*” – had fled Kinshasa after a failed coup attempt last year. (“I am flattered you recognize me, monsieur,” he’d said as I’d entered the loft conversion. If he had been possible to forget, his clothes, remembered from a dozen newspaper clips, would still have identified him. They were spectacular, their gorgeousness thrown into relief by the squalor of his rooms.)

“Louise,” said Kitendi, addressing the sentient ball gown, “would you please serve the *crêpe suzettes*?” The thing made something like a genuflection and floated through the door. “I can hardly believe it,” he continued, “Didier Dessinée at my table. The notori-

ous blasphemer! Hate-boy of feminists!” He turned to Babette, who sat between us, opposite Saint Loup. “My poor girl. Was working for him as uncomfortable as it looked?”

“She thinks he’s an artist,” said Saint Loup, dryly.

“And so he is,” said the General. “But Monsieur Dessinée celebrates human flesh; I, the flesh of spirits.” The ball gown re-entered, aflame with *crêpes*. I salivated. Though without appetite, my artificially enhanced sense of taste and smell had had me drooling over each course.

“And who’s your cook?” I asked. “Another fashion victim?”

“Victim? In this world one either dresses as a victim or victor. And it is the latter style that we choose, monsieur.”

“It is for the revolution,” interrupted Babette. “That is why we had to steal the clothes. We need hundreds, thousands.”

“An army,” said Saint Loup. “An army of *sapeurs*.”

“Peace,” said Kitendi, “before the *crêpes* grow cold.” We all picked up our forks. “The revolution!” he continued, while indulging his mouth. “That is only partly why they follow me. These days, monsieur, a cause is not enough. People need persuasion. A persuasion beyond politics. My boys and girls leave Kinshasa with nothing in their pockets and with stars in their eyes. When they arrive in Paris I give them clothes. Dermatoid clothes. Clothes they could never afford in a thousand years. Soon they crave more. ‘The allure,’ they moan, ‘O, the allure!’ The neurons in dermaplastic are designed to decay. Did you know that, monsieur? Designers programme the fibres to

decay even as they grow them in their tanks. So that the world, the privileged world, will cry out for more. But to my boys and girls I say, no, you cannot have more. I give them, monsieur, a little cold turkey. But I also teach them how to survive. Your clothes give you dreams, I say; now you must return the gift. You must *become* your clothes. The couture must bear the print of your consciousness. And then you and the allure can be as one."

"We're fucking *headhunters*!" Saint Loup spat out the words with glee. Kitendi looked at him crossly.

"In my village," said Kitendi, "(please excuse my crude lieutenant) there was a man who could put his spirit into a rock, a tree, a clod of earth. He lived to a great age. But my *sapeurs*, of course..."

"The body dies," said Babette, "but the spirit lives on in the couture."

"Together they become," said Kitendi, "a juju. A fetish."

"That old black magic," said Saint Loup.

"And a little of the new," said Kitendi. "I employ some very good doctors. All good Congolese men. One of them patched up your leg. Satisfactorily, I hope?" He looked about the room, frowning. "Louise? Ah, there you are. Go to Monsieur Dessinée. Yes, that's right, monsieur, touch her. See what she has become."

Tentatively, I ran my fingers through the rippling rucks and folds of artificial flesh. The gown was a revival of early eighteenth-century style: an arrangement of bodice and skirt (the bodice, decorated in bows and stiffened with whalebone; the skirt opened, in front, to reveal a lavishly embroidered petticoat.) It seemed as if it had stepped from a canvas by Watteau.

"Move your hand," said Kitendi, "to the small of the back." My hand closed on bone. "Only Ungaro and Gaultier have ever incorporated a cortex into their fashions. Something smaller, I am told, than the hind brain of certain dinosaurs. Gives an extra *frisson*. They always look for something new, no, monsieur? First it was to synthesize a polymer that could compete with biological materials such as leather, catgut, silk: molecularly-knitted plastic made of ring-molecules interlinked like quantum chain-mail. Dermaplastic! Then to make it live, monsieur! To give it nerve endings that would interact with the somatic system of the human body. Nerve endings programmed to give, not pain, but pleasure. Such psychotropic pleasure! Electromuscles, next. And then – O exquisite – a cortex to fine-tune those delights!"

"No fashion brain, there," said Saint Loup, pointing to my hand. "That's the real thing. Nature's finest."

"We found," said Kitendi, "that the lobes of the human cortex could be grafted onto those of a dress, a suit, whatever – the temporal, parietal, occipital lobes, wholly successfully. But the frontal lobe, the *thinking* part of the cortex... Well, monsieur, there were, as you would expect, some difficulties."

The ball gown floated away, the fibres of its hemline – like microscopic pseudopodia – carrying it gracefully across the floor.

"Chicks don't need to think," said Saint Loup. "Soldiers shouldn't think."

"Babette," I said, "what have you done, what have you done."

"The revolution," she said, with a child-like

earnestness that approached panic, "tell Didi about the revolution,"

Kitendi leaned back in his chair, his redbreasted smoking jacket swelling.

"Soon I shall return to my village," he said.

"A whole army," said Saint Loup, "in packing cases. Every day we fly more *sapeurs* to Zaire to be pawed over and worn by the rich, the corrupt. When we give the order –" He drew a finger across his throat.

"My excitable lieutenant," said Kitendi.

"Zaire will be the home of the allure," said Babette. "And all will be allure and ambiances!"

"And mine," Kitendi added, an expression of pity for Babette's ingenuousness a flicker in the dark continent of his face.

"So many poor people," said Babette, who was becoming increasingly distraught. "The allure can help them, Didi. I know it can!"

Kitendi set down his fork and pushed his plate aside. "He is either victim or victor, monsieur. And you..." He gestured to Saint Loup and said something in Swahili.

"Shit – I haven't finished my *crêpe*!"

"You are a complication, monsieur," said Kitendi.

Saint Loup was reaching inside his jacket.

"Skin," said Kitendi, "is everything. Above this abyss which is our life is stretched the only reality we know: this skin of sensation. It is the skin I care about, monsieur. It is skin I fight for. The black skin of my fathers."

"And *monsieur*," said Saint Loup, pausing in a parody of fastidiousness, "is *white*."

The glint of gun metal.

"Saint Loup tells me you want Babette," said Kitendi. "Saint Loup can be very perspicacious."

"I've seen them together," said Saint Loup, pointing his phallic toy into my face. "The white boy and his piece of chocolate."

"I –"

"Shh!" said Kitendi, putting a finger to his lips. "Babette has been very useful. How else could I have acquired so many Ungaro designs? She is an excellent thief. And now, monsieur, you propose to take her from me. Feelings, monsieur. They have betrayed you. I must say I am surprised. Like me, you have long served the surface of this world. You are a photographer. An observer. Your kind should consign their feelings to the abyss, to the nothingness that lies below. The skin of clothes, the skin of humans: it is all the same to me, monsieur. But I cannot have *whiteness* in my wardrobe. It simply *clashes* with my plans."

Babette had bowed her head. She fiddled with a napkin.

"When you broke into Ungaro – such gallantry – you punctured the skin of the world. My world. You would, I think, monsieur, betray us all to the depths..."

"My King – he saved us. You promised..." Babette was crying.

"You see what you have done?" said Kitendi. "But my beautiful Baba shall soon also be subsumed by her clothes. She shall be the most beautiful collection in my wardrobe! Purest, blackest skin!"

"And the allure shall wipe away her tears," said Saint Loup, grinning.

"Don't worry, monsieur," said Kitendi, "there is still time to finish your crêpe."

But "Louise" was already bringing our hats and coats.

My execution, I was informed, would take place at the river. The TV in the back of the car was playing a video: *Alphaville*. "Love this film," said Saint Loup. "If they ever do a re-make my agent..."

"Quiet," said Kitendi, who drove. "Keep your eyes on our guest."

Tied and gagged, I watched Eddie Constantine stride through the corridors of Alpha 60. Outside, *Sacré Coeur* looked down. God will not hear you now, Didi Dessinée, "famous blasphemer," I thought. So ends your glittering career. So end your romantic dreams.

My clothes, like my flesh, began to crawl. Withdrawal. The world was becoming quotidian. commonplace. Wretched. Allure, do not desert me now, I prayed. Give this crazy life a little colour, sheen, before I depart. The money, the women, the cars, the fame. I give you all these. But let me share you, unholy spirit of fashion, just once more, with Babette.

Rue de Clichy. Gare St Lazare. Boulevard Haussmann. Opéra. "Going swimming, man," mumbled Saint Loup. Alpha 60 was choking on its own heartlessness.

Rue de Faubourg-St-Honoré. *Pierre Cardin*. *Chloé*. *Lanvin*. *Saint-Laurent*.

"Stop!" cried Babette.

"What is it?" said Kitendi, slowing.

"Stop the car! Here! Quickly!" We pulled into the kerb opposite the darkened window of *Ungaro*.

"Let him go," said Babette. "Please – the allure – it is angry – I can tell!"

Kitendi tapped his fingers on the wheel. "Have you finished?" he said.

"White boy wants his swim," said Saint Loup.

Babette turned to face me. "We were poor," she said, "very poor, Didi. Like so many people in Kinshasa. When I was little I always dreamed about clothes. The clothes movie stars would wear, the clothes in old fashion magazines cut up and stuck to my bedroom walls. I always dreamed of Paris, Didi. I always dreamed of escape. So many people are still there, dreaming. Forgive me, Didi. I couldn't stand it: so many hopeless dreams. I wanted to give them beautiful things, beautiful lives. I wanted to give them the allure..."

Kitendi revved the engine; engaged first gear.

"Stop!" said Babette. "Don't make me –"

"Don't make you *what*?" said Kitendi.

As the car began to pull away Babette opened the door and threw herself onto the pavement. The car jerked to a halt. Kitendi cursed.

"Get back in here," he shouted.

"I shall call to them, Kitendi – I shall! Let Didi go. Now!" Kitendi got out of the car.

"Give me the gun," he said. Saint Loup wound down the window and passed out the handgun. Kitendi walked towards Babette.

"Don't come any closer," she said. "I believed in you – but you don't know about the allure. I don't think you ever have. Not really! Not what it is – not

what it can do!" Kitendi took aim. "*Ungaro*!" she called. "My children! My own!"

A colossal explosion and a splintering of glass. And onto the street came dresses and gowns, suits, skirts, jackets and accessories: a whole autumn collection in yellow and ochre, russet, auburn and Venetian red. Kitendi fired; a wedding dress doubled over, bleeding dye; and then the King of Sapeurdom was enveloped by the suffocating attentions of that army of *haute couture*.

Through the open window of the car a black stocking wriggled, bewitching my rival like a sorcerous viper, rooting him, wide-eyed, to his seat. "Bitch-cake!" he yelled, as the hosiery found purchase about his throat. I shrank away; and when, seconds later, I looked again, it was to see Saint Loup being dragged across the street to be left suspended from the perverse gallows of a lamppost.

Cars were stopping; passersby screamed.

Babette ran back to the car, tearing off her clothes, so that by the time she had taken the wheel and begun to accelerate, she was as naked and as beautiful as a great jungle cat.

"Forgive me, Didi."

"Those clothes, those things..."

"I taught them, Didi. Taught them with love. The allure, Didi. The allure is love."

Alphaville was drawing to its end. Eddie Constantine and Anna Karina were driving away from the city of night.

"You're looking at me very strangely," said Anna Karina.

"Yes."

"You're waiting for me to say something to you."

"Yes."

"I don't know what to say. They're words I don't know. I wasn't taught them. Help me."

"Impossible, princess. Help yourself. Then you'll be saved. If you don't, you're as lost as the dead of *Alphaville*."

I lay back. The streets, black on white, white on black, slipped by. I knew one day, perhaps one day soon, from my lips or hers, the words would come. I could wait.

O Babette – New York, London, Paris, Milan...

We left Paris by the Boulevard Périphérique. Out there, the void, chill and dark; but we were travelling beyond the skin of the world, beyond all the monochrome cities of the night, speeding to that place Kitendi feared, speeding through the immense spaces of nothingness, to – where?

It was a rumoured place, a haven that we, with our atrophied, fashion-dead hearts, could only guess at.

"A night drive across intersidereal space, and we'd be home."

Richard Calder is one of our most exciting new British discoveries. His first story, "Toxine," appeared as an original item in *Interzone: The 4th Anthology* (1989; just out in paperback from NEL at 3.50). It was followed by the well-received "Mosquito" (IZ 32) and "The Lilim" (IZ 34). Since writing the above story, Calder has moved from England to Thailand, where he is assisting his Thai-born wife to run a shop and is also hoping to complete his first novel.

Terry Bisson

Interview by Gregory Feeley

Terry Bisson's first novel, *Wyrdmaker*, appeared in 1981 as part of Pocket Book's nascent Timescape line. A heroic fantasy with an sf rationale, it was notable for its numerous inventive touches and understated intelligence. Five years later Bisson published *Talking Man*, an off-beat and distinctive fantasy set on the Kentucky-Tennessee line and featuring a wizard who ran an auto junkyard, his daughter who grew tobacco, and a supernatural trip in a '62 Chrysler across the North Pole and through a succession of alternate Americas. Its authenticity of detail and deadpan charm won it a nomination for the World Fantasy Award, and moved numerous reviewers to declare Terry Bisson a writer to watch.

In 1988 Bisson published *Fire on the Mountain*, an alternative history that memorably imagines a black socialist utopia arising from the success of John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry in Virginia. The book won widespread praise, although its compact dimensions and refusal to partake of conventional genre drama may have limited its popular success, to say nothing of its fortunes in the field's myriad prize nominations.

Bisson's status as a fantasy writer seems similarly uncertain to those readers least sympathetic to genre conventions. Charles Naylor (perhaps best known to sf readers as co-author of *Neighboring Lives* with Thomas M. Disch) called *Talking Man* a wonderful novel of the American South whose author would do well to forget about fantasy. And indeed Bisson's other published works are farther still from genre epicentres, including two books of American biography that deal with Black history. For this reason it was something of a surprise to learn that Bisson has a number of more nearly science-fictional works scheduled to appear in 1990, including short stories and an sf novel, *Voyage to the Red Planet*, which he discusses below.

Feeley: You have worked in publishing for many years, but despite your address, you are plainly not a Brooklyn boy. How do you feel your Southern background informs your work? **Bisson:** Well, how it informs the work is sort of in the work. I'm from Ken-

tucky, which is the upper edge of the South. My own roots in terms of literature are science fiction – I'm from a small town, and the first reading I did tended to be science fiction; this was back in the fifties. I'm pretty typical in that sense – that was my discovery of literature. I remember reading Bradbury, *City*, *Childhood's End* – it isn't great literature, but it opened enormous vistas. When we were sixteen a friend and I would hitchhike to Evansville, Indiana, where you could find it second-hand. You couldn't find it all in Owensboro, which had one bookstore. And then, like others, I lost contact with science fiction in the sixties and seventies, and had the standard literary education in college, at the University of Louisville.

I came back to science fiction when I was writing copy at Berkley Books in New York, in the late seventies. I had tried to be a literary novelist, and failed. I had written a book in 1965, the kind of pastiche of *On the Road* that everybody writes, and it was good enough to get me an agent but not enough to get me published. But when I was writing copy, David Hartwell – who was then at Berkley – said, "We're buying anything with sword and wizards, and you can write one of these books – you've got the language." And basically I said, "Get thee behind me, Satan," but eventually I did it. He said, "I can give you an advance" – you know, eleven hundred dollars or something (laughs). And so I did it, although by the time *Wyrdmaker* was finished Hartwell was at Pocket Books, so it was published there.

So Hartwell pushed me into writing again, and I'll always feel thankful that he did. I still like *Wyrdmaker*, I think it's a good book. It's definitely, as you say, a guy with a big sword chasing a maiden, but I think it's gruesome and fun in its own way. But what it did for me was get me off that feeling that if you're not Hemingway or Kerouac you shouldn't bother. And it broke my ten, twelve-year writer's block.

What were you doing in the five years between it and *Talking Man*?

I was involved in politics. I was working with the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, and though I had sold the outline for *Talking Man*, I had become a twenty-four-a-day political activist,

and a lot of the ideas for *Fire on the Mountain* came from that period.

By 1984 or so everybody had forgotten about the book, even Hartwell who had bought it. In fact he and I came up with the idea for the book: the cars. It was right after *Wyrdmaker* came out, which he was pleased with, and over lunch he mentioned that he used to have this old Ford, a '49 or '50, with a flathead Six which could out-drag the V-8s. And I said, That's true, I remember that the Sixes were faster off the line than the V-8s. So we got talking and got around to the idea of a wizard book that used old cars instead of the usual apparatus. And I thought up *Talking Man* as a kind of hardware fantasy. I finished it in 1985, after sitting on it for four years, because I knew it was a story that wouldn't get told if I didn't tell it. And I had a certain affection for it.

Someone called it a white-trash fantasy.

It definitely has that element too. The character of Talking Man is based on an old shade-tree mechanic I knew in Kentucky. He turns up again in *Fire on the Mountain* as Elvis Presley Cardwell.

Has anyone asked you why you put a character named Elvis Presley in an otherwise serious alternate-history novel?

Commercial reasons. I've noticed that books with Elvis in them tend to sell better.

You said once that you don't think of yourself as being an especially Southern writer, in the sense of Harry Crews and others who give a strong sense of place in whatever they write.

Well, but I was wrong. For the past couple of years I've been going to southern writers' conferences – this fall I'm going to the Southern Festival of Books, and last year I went to the Kentucky Book Fair in Nashville. I just came back from Kentucky a week ago; I had a reading in my hometown, where they had a little creative-writing workshop for students from all over the state. So I've been trying to establish credentials as a – not exactly a regional writer. I've never liked "Southern writing." I've never felt close to the whole idea of Harry Crews, or Grizzard. I don't like the Southern Gothic tradition, McCullers, Faulkner, Capote.



But at the same time, when I look back at my own stuff, there's definitely a Southern element in it.

Your new book, *Voyage to the Red Planet*, does not sound especially Southern.

No, it's not, although one of the heroes is from the South. And I believe a possum gets cooked in it.

You have said that it's a pure science-fiction novel, probably your first that is unequivocally sf.

Yeah, I thought of the idea sort of as a good. I thought this idea would seem like pure science fiction. The basic idea of the book is: the space programme is shut down, nobody's financing or doing anything in space, and a bunch of movie companies find out that a ship was built for a US-Soviet Mars mission back in 1999, and was abandoned when the Depression came. So these movie companies claim the ship under salvage law, and they go to Mars to make the first movie there because they figure that's the best way to recover their investment. It was conceived of as a Ship of Fools in space. I thought it would be a lot of fun to write, and of course it turned out to be one of the hardest books I've done. The fun ones to read aren't fun to write.

Most of your books are very short by today's measures. The standard sf novel of twenty-five years ago was 140-180 pages; that's what Ace Books and Doubleday were prepared to do. Today the average sf novel comes in

around 300 pages.

And starts a trilogy as well.

Yes. Yours are much more compact. Does your new book share this quality?

It's short; Hartwell says they're all too short. But I like short books. I like to write them, I like to read them. I don't like to read long books.

I thought Hartwell's magazine [New York Review of Science Fiction] hailed *Fire on the Mountain* as evidence that good books don't have to be long. Making a virtue of necessity?

Yeah, I think so (laughs). But I think most novels are too long, even the great novels. Yet while science fiction runs long, modern printing tends to be shorter. There is a kind of economy in it. **Certainly the so-called Minimalists are working toward compression, going by implication rather than exposition. Do you feel an affinity for that?**

I guess. I strive for a certain economy, and just try to...keep it short.

You have a couple of short stories coming out. Are they –

Short? (laughs). They're too long, my short stories are all too long! The first story I sold ran 5000 words, which seems monstrously long to me for a story. I like them 2000 words – like everybody else, when I pick up a magazine I read the shorter ones first. **Do your stories also occupy some intermediate zone between genre fantasy and contemporary fiction?**

Well, yeah, I guess. The stories are like *Talking Man*, sort of a mix of fantasy and reality, and set in the South. For some reason, my first four stories – I didn't write stories until this year, and I wrote four during the wind-up of my Mars book and sold the first two – are all set in the Kentucky-Tennessee area. The first was "Over Flat Mountain," which went to *Omni* – a nice way to start. It's about what if all the Appalachians were rolled up into one big mountain. And "Bears Discover Fire" went to *Asimov's*.

"Bears Discover Fire"?

It's about what you'd think. And then there's a couple of others I'm still trying to sell.

You've done a couple of non-fiction books.

A biography of Nat Turner, and another on Harriet Tubman, also coming out this summer from Chelsea House. They're about 20,000 words, with a lot of illustrations, and are marketed for Young Adults, but that just means a short biography. I don't write down for kids.

What are you working on now?

I'm just starting a new novel. It's called *Surf City*, and it's about a political prison for entire families on the Jersey Shore. The story is about teenagers who were raised there, a sort of *Romeo and Juliet*, with a boy from a revolutionary family and a girl from a Mafia family. It's based on a short stint in a federal prison I did as a result of my

political work.

And I'm also closing out a couple other projects. I'm doing a book for Dell called *Car Talk With Click and Clack*, the Tappett Brothers. I don't know if you've ever heard of them. They're a couple of guys who run a garage in Cambridge, one is now a professor at a Boston University, and they do this call-in radio show about cars, sort of a cross between Doctor Ruth and Garrison Keillor.

You have worked as an auto mechanic. Did that recommend you to the *Car Talk* assignment?

Yeah, it did. But the agent who handled it had read *Talking Man*, so knew that I knew how to put a book together, which was what they really needed. When I applied for the job, I wrote a letter listing my credentials – I was an air-cooled engine man, a diesel mechanic, I've worked on farm equipment, worked on transmissions – and then sort of as a joke I added that I had played rhythm guitar with the Allen County Jumper Cables, this string band down in Kentucky. And the agent told me that that is why they gave me the job; they like bluegrass a lot.

I'm also finishing editing a book of writings by political prisoners in the US, which I've been working on for two years now. It's called *Hauling Up the Morning*. Everybody from Leonard Peltier to Kathy Boudin to the FALN is in it. It's for Africa World Press.

***Fire on the Mountain* got very good reviews in the sf and mainstream press, but didn't attract any attention on the Left.**

Well, I don't want to sound like a sourpuss, but, yeah. The book is a polemic in a sense, it is a political argument on one level about black nationalism and American history. It's a socialist utopia, so you'd think socialists would be interested.

John Brown has always interested me, because he is one of the most maligned characters in American history. I had researched John Brown while I was in the John Brown Anti-Klan Group. And I drive down the Shenandoah every year, because my wife is from Tennessee, so I know that country pretty well. A thesis of my book is that John Brown's raid failed not because he was a fanatic or stupid. We were driving down the Valley, and it struck me if he hadn't failed, there would have been a fire on the mountain – the title came to me from that, the notion that if a small army of abolitionists had gotten up there, they might not have been able to do much, but nobody could have gotten them down. And the fire itself would have made a difference in how people reacted to it. And of course the idea of Nova Africa I didn't make up; we were working with black nationalists, many of them citizens of the Republic of New Africa that started back in the sixties.

Your new book sounds as though its theme could lend itself to a satirical treatment of advanced capitalism in the movie industry.

Yes, it's a political book in a sense. If *Fire on the Mountain* is a utopian view of what might have happened, *Voyage to the Red Planet* is your standard sf dystopia, though I hope humorous. And not too standard.

Are you familiar with the work of other Southern sf writers, such as Howard Waldrop and Michael Bishop?

I haven't read much Waldrop besides "The Ugly Chickens," which I liked a lot. I love Bishop's work, but to me it's not necessarily Southern. Bishop wrote a book called *Unicorn Mountain*, which is set in a little Colorado town called Huerfano. The town's actual name is Gardner, and it's set in a valley called Huerfano. I talked to Bishop about it, and it turns out he used to live there. It's right on the border between the mountain and the plains, beautiful country, and now there are hundreds of hippies out there, or used to be, and I was one of them. We built communes, domes up in the mountains, this was between '69 and '72-3. The guy *Talking Man* is dedicated to, Peter Rabbit, is an old Huerfano Valley hippie.

Can you say anything about the dedication of *Fire on the Mountain*?

Fire on the Mountain is dedicated to Kuwasi Balagoon and the Black Liberation Army. I never got any shit about that, though I had figured I would. Kuwasi was one of the Panther 21 in the sixties, when he was a young kid. The Black Liberation Army was what happened after the Panthers were driven underground by the police. There were police assassinations, bank robberies, people trying to do what the IRA, Sandinistas, have done. Many people went to prison, but Kuwasi stayed out (pretty much) until the Brinks Robbery around '81. He was a beautiful guy, and died of AIDS in prison about three years ago.

You make most of your living in the book business, copywriting and editing.

Yes, I can't afford to be an auto mechanic any more; the technology has passed me by. I had lived in New York in the sixties, and worked as a copywriter, edited a magazine called *Web of Horror*, wrote for horror comics, romance magazines, a sort of literary hack. I really wanted to get out, so I moved to the communes, got into auto work and ended up back in Kentucky. I came back to New York around 1975 and worked in a taxi garage, without planning to work in publishing. I did write copy on the side – I could pick up a hundred bucks for a few hours' work – and that sort of sucked me back in. I remember when somebody offered me a job my response was, again, "Get

thee behind me!" But I ended up doing it.

Do you tend to regard your non-fiction as simply work?

Aside from copywriting I haven't done much non-fiction, except for the Nat Turner book, which I am very close to. To me it's a little jewel – allowing for an author's customary modesty, of course.

Do your future projects include more non-fiction and short fiction?

Short fiction, yes. I have about ten stories started. I haven't yet discovered a reliable way to finish stories. The four I have finished are also set in *Talking Man* country, but the others include what I would call straight science-fiction stories. This novel that I'm starting is a political novel in the sense that *Fire on the Mountain* is political. It's a little closer to my heart, an argumentative, speculative novel. And it's going to be quite a bit of work.

I have a fairly ambitious plan for two or three inter-related novels, much as I hate that kind of crap when other people do it (laughs). I have a five or six-year agenda, to take a look at the political changes in the world we are seeing now. The "end" of Communism, as the American press calls it. I'm more optimistic than that.

For a while I thought that maybe I was just posing as a science-fiction writer, that I was one of those guys who wasn't really an sf writer. But actually I think I am, especially after *Voyage to the Red Planet*. My first enthusiasm was science fiction, and I write the kind of sf I still like to read today. I like the machinery, I like the distances, I actually like it. I feel it's more my natural territory than *Wyrdmaker*, in which I was kind of faking it. *Talking Man* wasn't faking it; it's right where I want to be. I disagree with Charles Naylor: it's a fantasy book, it's not anything else. You had to go to the North Pole to make it happen.

Note: Terry Bisson's first two novels, *Wyrdmaker* and *Talking Man*, have been published in Britain as paperback originals from Headline. Unfortunately, we know of no plans at present for UK editions of *Fire on the Mountain* or *Voyage to the Red Planet*.

BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5, 7, 16 and 17). They cost £2.30 each inland (postage included), or £2.50 each overseas (USA: \$4 sea mail, or \$5 air mail). However, UK purchasers who buy three or more in one order may have them at £1.95 each (i.e. post free).

Don't Look Back

John Gribbin

It was the audio cube that started it. Richie Jefferies – his birth certificate said “Richard,” but he was just the generation to have been “Richie,” after the Beatles’ drummer, since they burst on the scene when he was eight – had been waiting for them to perfect the damn thing for twenty years. CDs were all very well, but they were bulky and all too easily damaged. This, at last, was the perfect medium for the serious music lover. The entire output of the original Beatles, digitally remastered and stored in a cube the size of a sugar lump. Of course, the new music was all very well, in its place. But it lacked the vibrancy of the rock originals – and with the digital reprocessing, you could practically hear a pin drop in the Abbey Road studios. There was stuff in here, according to George, the only survivor from the quartet, that they hadn’t been able to hear on the original analogue tapes in the recording studio itself, back in the sixties. The same computer enhancement that cleaned up the pictures from Charon, applied to something practical for a change. As far as Richie was concerned, the best thing ever to come out of the space programme.

Of course, space was old hat now. Last century’s thing. All the cutting-edge-of-technology stuff revolved around the time probe, where Richie worked as a communications engineer. Reasonable hours, good pay. If you could tolerate the bureaucracy, an ideal job, giving him ample time for his hobby. But at 53 he was coming up for retirement, with the prospect of time weighing heavy on his hands. What he needed was a project to get his teeth into. Something in audio; something like the job that had been done on the Beatles tapes – only, where could a freelance get his hands on any worthwhile old material that wasn’t already owned by one of the Japanese communications groups?

Part of the problem lay in Richie’s somewhat narrow definition of the term “worthwhile.” Apart from the Beatles, there were only three artistes he seriously thought worthy of the skills he had to offer. Elvis, Buddy Holly, and Bruce Springsteen. And of the three, only Holly had actually worked with John Lennon. The *Double Diamond* album, Lennon’s comeback at the end of the seventies, after, as legend claimed, Holly had turned up at the Dakota apartment, guitar across his back, and practically dragged the recluse out of his shell. The tour in ’81, which Richie had not only caught three times in the States, but had followed to London for the Wembley Stadium gig. Holly, Lennon, Jerry Allison on drums and Klaus Voorman on bass; the best gig of the rock era, even

before their friends joined them onstage. And the songwriting partnership that flourished into the nineties, with Lennon’s roughness tempered by Holly’s softer approach in a blend that surpassed even Lennon’s early work with McCartney. “Holly-Lennon” – the credit on more hit records than any other composing team, ever.

But they were gone, and nothing like them would ever be seen again. All the post-’78 stuff was just as legally tied up as the Beatles stuff, and had, in any case, already been given the treatment by the big studios in Leipzig. Besides, it was too sophisticated for Richie’s wants. What he wanted – what he needed – was a challenge. Something older. Lost tapes from the fifties, maybe. A real challenge.

Ildly, he pictured the period he’d like to reproduce with modern technology. He could pinpoint it exactly. Holly’s first solo period, in 1959. After the first split with the Crickets, before the band reformed. The “Winter Dance Party Tour,” through Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. Where Holly had sung anything and everything, even played drums for Dion’s band. If only somebody had taken a tape recorder along to one of those gigs, and left the tapes in a time capsule to be opened fifty years later. They’d just about be due to be discovered.

Richie, slumped before his console, eyes half-shut, suddenly snapped upright, fully alert. *If only...*

He leaned forward, touched a pad. “Jefferies. Logging out. I’m heading on home, don’t feel so good. I’ll take an early night, hope to be in in the morning.”

Back home, he checked out the dates in John Goldrosen’s massive *Buddy Holly, His Life and Times*. The memorial volume published after Holly’s tragically early death in ’97, at the age of 61, was just about the definitive history of the rock era, a labour of love based on interviews with everyone from Niki Sullivan, who’d played with the great man before he was famous, to his nineties protégés, Heartbeat. Since Holly had played with, or written for, just about anybody who was anybody from 1957 to ’97, it was small wonder that Goldrosen had travelled more than 50,000 miles researching the book, and spent three years writing it. But out of the half million words in the database, Richie was interested now in just a couple of thousand.

Holly had left the tour after the gig in Moorhead, Minnesota on February 3, 1959, with a bad head cold that had affected his singing during the two shows. Flying home to New York, he’d stayed out of the

public eye until spring, emerging with his first post-Crickets album, the million-selling *True Love Ways*. So Moorhead was out; Richie didn't want tapes of Holly singing with a head cold. But everything had been fine – except the weather – the night before in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. After several weeks on the road, the show was firing on all cylinders. That, Richie decided, was the date to aim for – taking suitable precautions to wrap up warm, since Goldrosen's account reported that Holly's drummer, Charlie Bunch, had suffered frostbite when the band bus broke down in the snow one night early in the tour.

Choosing a recorder was a minor problem. Richie had several antiques, but nothing right for the period. Besides, a fifties tape machine really might be a little too basic. He settled for a '65 Uher. Only a pro would know it was slightly beyond the state of the art in '59 – and how many pros would he be likely to find in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, at a rock concert on a freezing February evening? The temptation to pocket a Sony Cubic was almost too much, but he respected the people who'd drawn up the anachronism rules. If he was caught in the act, but clean, he could hardly face anything worse than a slightly earlier retirement than he'd anticipated. But if he was caught dropping anachronisms into the past, it would be a Federal matter.

The clothes were no problem. He could pick them up out at the project. All he'd need then would be about five minutes alone with the Beast – not too difficult to arrange for a communications engineer. If everyone who was supposed to be on observer duty simultaneously got an override request to be somewhere else, who would know, except the Central Processor? And with a little tweaking, the CP would forget it even before it happened. Since a Trip didn't occupy any real time in the here and now, he just had to set the remote, walk through the beam and out the other side. Only, to his subjective time the walk through the beam would take about five hours, and would include an opportunity to record one of the great "lost" concerts. Using old-fashioned analogue tape on a primitive battery-powered machine. Then, he could clean it up digitally, cube it, and – well, of course, he could never let anyone know. Could he?

Hell, cross that bridge when the time comes. For now, there was a chance not only to tape Holly, but to see him and hear him live, once again. It might not quite be Wembley '81, and he might be 53, not 25, but he felt, once again, that old tingle down the spine, just thinking about it. "Let's do it, Richie, now," he muttered under his breath, thinking "or I'll get cold feet, and never do it."

He not only got into the hall, the Surf Ballroom, early – he got in free, thanks to the policy of the manager, Carroll Anderson, of allowing "parents" in as his guests, to reassure them that the kids would get up to no mischief under his care. As for the tape machine, Anderson was impressed by its compactness and the quality of its sound reproduction, and happy to let Richie make a tape "for the kids." No problem.

The problems came later.

Nobody but a pro could tell the anachronism of the Uher. Hell, how was he to know the kid was a pro? Sure, he'd become a studio whiz in the sixties. But he

was just 22 now, brought up in the back of Texas, with a good-ol'-boy accent you could cut with a knife. Why didn't Goldrosen's goddam biography tell you Holly had been dabbling in studio technology since he was seventeen?

It was only three numbers into the first set that Richie noticed the bespectacled drummer repeatedly looking his way. By the time Holly returned to lead his own band into action, the musician's interest was sufficiently obvious to prevent Richie melting into the young fans around him. Holly beckoned Richie forward to the centre of the stage, where the youngsters happily made way for anyone who was the object of their idol's attention, sang two verses of "Rave On" straight to Richie's microphone, and at the end of the set announced to the crowd that tonight's show had been recorded by a big New York radio station and that y'all might get to hear yourselves on the radio if you were real lucky.

An audio expert, and a joker as well. At Holly's insistence, the band hauled a reluctant Richie backstage to play them the tracks. The Uher, he explained, was the latest thing from Europe. He ran a radio repair shop, down town; his kid brother, in the army in Germany, had sent him the machine for his birthday.

They seemed to buy the story. The trouble was, Holly wanted to buy the machine, as well. Or at least, get Richie to let him have the tapes. They sounded real good, almost as good as the stuff he'd recorded with J.I., back at Bobby Peeples' garage in Lubbock. Wow. Whatever had happened to old Bobby?

Whatever happened, Richie knew he had to keep tight hold of the recorder. The tapes, along with himself and the machine, would be pulled back by the Beast in about an hour from now. Let Holly have them, bury them deep in his baggage, and they'd simply be gone in the morning. Untraceable. But he dared not let anyone with any kind of expert knowledge get a good look at a machine from six years in their future.

The tour manager announced that the bus was ready to leave. Holly wanted to hear some more of the tapes. He called Carroll Anderson over. That idea they'd discussed earlier, was it still on? Anderson shrugged. He'd made a few phone calls. There was a guy at the Mason City airport, Roger Peterson, who could fly three of them on to Moorhead, if they really wanted to go. But it was a filthy night; Anderson thought Holly had changed his mind, and was going to ride in the bus?

No. No. He'd changed it back again. He was gonna listen to these tapes for maybe half an hour; and anyway, he thought he had a cold coming on. Could Mr Anderson, please, get back on the phone and fix everything up? Then maybe Mr Anderson could drive him out to the airport? The bus could leave now. Let them suffer the 400-mile journey. In a couple of hours, he would be tucked up in a nice warm bed.

Richie, trying to remain inconspicuous, frowned. There was something wrong here. That kid was certainly a smooth operator. Polite as any southern gentleman, but somehow everyone jumped when he whispered "frog." But that wasn't the problem. Richie shook his head, trying to clear it. He felt rather peculiar. What was it now? Oh yes. *There was nothing about*

flying in the biography, not until tomorrow night, when Holly pulled out of the tour. Puzzled, he scarcely noticed the bickering among several of the singer's associates – resolved when two that Richie recognized from the show, his namesake, Richie Valens, and the big man, the Big Bopper, stayed with Holly while the rest scrambled for the bus.

He had to get out of here. But how? Richie played the tapes some more, desperately seeking for an out before the Beast hauled him back. When Anderson returned with the car, he was so relieved that he simply thrust the tapes into Holly's hands, told him he could keep them, and practically sprinted out of sight around the corner of the car park. He had a bad feeling that he had not been as inconspicuous as the Project would have liked. In fact, he felt bad all over. Richie leaned against the wall, then slumped to the ground. He felt really weird.

There was nobody there to notice when he, and the Uher, simply faded away.

It was the audio cube that started it. Richie Jeffries, listening to *The Beatles Complete* in his home studio, got to daydreaming about all the really great artistes who'd never had the benefit of the technology. Among the clutter of rock memorabilia on the wall, his eye caught the framed poster-size blow-up of the Clear Lake *Mirror Reporter* from 1959, recording the death of three rock 'n rollers in a plane crash, following a gig in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. Buddy Holly, now. By all accounts, he would have known what to do with any recording medium. What a loss. But he was dead, and that was it.

Of course, there were people around who weren't dead, but might just as well be. Or who might be dead, for all anyone knew. The eternal rock mystery, that gave the headline writers something to do every year or so – was John Lennon still alive? What was it this month – the Greta Garbo of pop? or the Howard Hughes of rock? Whatever, the business empire built by Yoko continued to function long after her death, and the lawyers said Lennon was alive, though he hadn't performed since the mid-seventies and hadn't been seen in public since her funeral in '99.

Now, thought Richie, sipping his scotch. If someone like Lennon had made a few recordings even as long ago as the eighties, and they were halfway near as good as the stuff he'd done before, then with modern technology they could be tweaked up to sound as good as – well, as good as anything Clapton had done, for sure.

Trouble was, Lennon hadn't recorded anything in the eighties. If only somebody had gone along to him in the Dakota, maybe in the middle of 1979, and had a little chat to him. Got him back into the studio.

Richie, slumped in front of the mixing deck, eyes half-shut, suddenly snapped upright, fully alert. If only...

John Gribbin last appeared in *Interzone* with a short-short called "Other Edens" (issue 31). He is probably Britain's best known and most prolific popular-science writer, author of numerous books and articles on physics, biology, climatology and other topics. But his reputation as a writer of fiction is growing, particularly since the publication of his first solo sf novel, *Father to the Man* (1989).

IMAGINARY PEOPLE

(Avatars of Dr Shade?)

Alice, Asterix, Dick Barton, Batman, Biggles, Sexton Blake, James Bond, William Brown, Billy Bunter, Nick Carter, Professor Challenger, Conan the Barbarian, Jerry Cornelius, Robinson Crusoe, Dan Dare, Count Dracula, Bulldog Drummond, Fantomas, Victor Frankenstein, Dr Fu Manchu, Dorothy Gale, Gandalf, Flash Gordon, Lemuel Gulliver, Richard Hannay, Jeff Hawke, Sherlock Holmes, Howard the Duck, the Invisible Man, Dr Jekyll, Indiana Jones, Kai Lung, King Kong, Captain Kirk, Arsene Lupin, Mad Max, Captain Marvel, Mowgli, Captain Nemo, the Wizard of Oz, Peter Pan, Allan Quatermain, Professor Quatermass, A.J. Raffles, Frank Reade, Perry Rhodan, Buck Rogers, Rupert Bear, the Saint, Doc Savage, the Scarlet Pimpernel, the Shadow, She-Who-Must-be-Obeyed, Superman, Dr Syn, Tarzan, Dick Tracy, Dr Who, Nero Wolfe and Zorro...

All of the above and over a thousand others have detailed entries in **David Pringle's** entertaining reference book *Imaginary People: A Who's Who of Modern Fictional Characters* (Grafton Books, 1987, hardcover, £14.95), which contains over 500 pages of vital information. See pages 7-8 of Kim Newman's story "The Original Dr Shade" (*Interzone* 36) for an apocryphal sample entry.

The publishers have now made several hundred copies of the hardback first edition of this book available to *Interzone* readers at a knock-down price. Order yours from us at **just £6**, postage and packing included – less than half the original cover price of £14.95. Make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone* and send them to **124 Osborne Road, Brighton BN1 6LU**. The above price of £6 is good for UK residents only; persons overseas please send £7.50 (USA \$12 seamail).

'A fictional Valhalla where the characters never die... a fascinating companion' – *The Listener*

Mutant Popcorn

Film reviews by Nick Lowe

"I'm sorry about your bumper, Mr Katzenjammer, berg, but this really won't take a moment. You see, I've a script here I know you're going to – Well, it's an environmental action thriller inspired by those Sellafield fathers in England, you know? Except that there's a meltdown at a top secret experimental nuclear station and all the core workers start producing this mutant testosterone. Well, the government tries to hush it up, but the guys escape and grow 24-inch stiffies that can shoot particle beams and stuff, and when the world gets invaded by horny aliens with giant semi-automatic steel peckers it's a battle to the finish with humanity's fate in the balance... Yeah, it's called *Dick Wars* – what? *Variety*? No, I've been busy on the script, I haven't had time to read... Oh. Well, listen, no, I think 'reality overshoot' is too strong a term... Oh. Uh-huh. Yes, I see. Yes. Well then, I've got a treatment here for a sequel I know you're going to – yes, I know the lights are changing, but it's called *Honey, I Inadvertently Vaporized the Kids' Heads with the Experimental Prototype Nulitronic Destructor Cannon*... Excuse me! excuse me, my *I Love Lucy* tie's caught in your window..."

Well, it'll all be history by the time this appears, and there's lots smarter money than mine riding on the forecast. But with *Back to the Future Part III* settling quietly for third, it does look as though the struggle for the mid-summer boxoffice crown is turning to a straight slugitout between *Total Recall* and *Dick Tracy*; and it's got to be said there's something rather symbolic, all sophomoric double entendres aside, about the Dick vs Dick faceoff. For this, more than any summer rivalry in memory, is a contest in commercial virility. In the one corner we have an almost by-numbers, tailor-made new-Hollywood blockbuster, with a rising European director, heavily physical script, cackling sense of humour, blood by the pumpload, lots of women kicking each other in the stomach, guns the size of severely aroused elephant parts, and the whole thing plotted and edited for a projected consumer with the attention span of a hyperactive gnat. It couldn't lose if you

put Gene Wilder in it. And who do we in fact have grinning out from the centre of this frame? We have the no-contest biggest star on earth, the perfect and irreplaceable hero for the times. He's beautiful, he's funny, he's a new Republican family man who believes in America and has got where he is by wresting control of his own life and pushing till the sweat pours off. And the ultimate irony is, he's become his character. He's completely unstoppable. We let him into our hearts of our own will, and now there's this millionaire monster on the loose, commanding our dreams and invulnerable to all failure. He's like a sincere, impossibly perfect human edition of George Bush; and God help us, we love him to death and back. Who will save us now?

But surely that can't be his opponent? – that sad-looking emeritus gigolo, old enough to be a Rolling Stone, in the silly yellow coat that doesn't even look rainproof? Yet there he stands, and around him the lushness of old Hollywood in all its thirties regalia: a Disney family adventure, in a nostalgic period frame. The colossal moon is always full, and the best player on the team is a kid with excess painted-on freckles. Even the cityscapes, which deliberately look drawn, call out the echoes of ancient animation backgrounds. It's soft, slow, sentimental, and trod to strains of Sondheim. There's time to think about all the dopey plotting; and the last scene introduces a flagrant tease for the merchandise. Be like this child. Own a wrist radio. Live life in seven saturated colours. By eloquent contrast, the one and only commercial spinoff from *Total Recall* is a state-of-the-art Nintendo video game.

There are plenty of surefire things about *Total Recall*, but let's start with the part that matters most to us (oh do stop it): the Dick (honestly, I don't enjoy this any more than you do). Within the community, "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" is something close to a sacred text: perhaps the greatest story, certainly one of the half-dozen, by incomparably the most important producer of post-war magazine short fiction. *Total*

Recall claims the vogue phrase "inspired by" rather than the less cautious "based on" or "from"; so we're not looking for more than a general sense of fidelity to the spirit of grim metaphysical farce in Dick's hardly filmable tale. But in fact, we get quite a lot more. The essence of the setup is preserved, even at the expense of some surprisingly clunky exposition and exquisitely dated references ("trabinium"? holidays on Saturn? Mars??). There's one sad fluff early on, when the narrative drops the Arnie viewpoint for a fatally objective glimpse of what's really about, but I guess the pulp team supreme O'Bannon & Shussett aren't the type to worry about external focalizers and the modalities of narrative. And if you can overlook that scene and pretend that you've never been told whose half of the plot is real and whose fantasy, the impossibly perfect genre ending and last-shot clinch have a fine Brazilian edge of irony that if anything improves on the story.

But the really unexpected thing is that the conceptual mayhem is actually advanced rather than diminished by the (comparatively late) arrivals of first Schwarzenegger and then Verhoeven in the project's development. The most surreal, postDickian metaphysical gag in *Total Recall* is the sober exploration of what it would be like for an ordinary earthling to wake up one morning and find you're being played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. If your name is "Quaid," what are you doing with that heavy Austrian accent and pex like a rhino? Wouldn't you be more likely to be called something butchly Teutonic like, oh, "Hauser"? And are you sure you should be working on a building site? Wouldn't you feel more natural wasting mutant riff-raff with a nuker bazooka? It's no wonder the poor fellow is a little disoriented. "Which is more likely?" runs the best line in the film – in fact, almost the best line in anything – "that you're an invincible secret agent who's the victim of an interplanetary conspiracy to make him think he's a construction worker?" It hardly surprises when your wife calls the doctor and he turns out to be played by Michael Ironside, in shades yet (a career high, this performance: shouldn't think he'll be resting

again for a while).

And then there's Verhoeven. Not since Polanski has a European arthouse obscurity made the jump to Hollywood pop with such blaring, unimagined success. I don't think there's any doubt he's edged past with this film to become the most sheerly bankable maker in town. It's not immediately obvious, looking back at his own-language work from the seventies, why it should have happened to him instead of (say) Blier or Argento, unless it's that all the Dutch speak perfect English. He does do farcical extremes of violence better than anyone, which I suppose is a handy qualification, but against that he has this agreeable streak of mischievous sadism towards his heroes that doesn't readily fit in a Hollywood frame, and already is toning down in this first star vehicle. Whatever, just as Cameron was the ideal architect of the definitive Arnold persona, Verhoeven is the perfect choice to supervise its ultimate deconstruction. Never have such rampant machineries of firepower discharged themselves so expressively into the camera; and never have the idiocies of an O'Bannon plot seemed more amusingly forgivable. Is this *Oz*, or is it *Kansas*? What would *really* happen if you turned the entire core of a planet to oxygen in the space of ninety seconds? Did the American Human Association get any input on the fish scene? Isn't the finale a straight crib from *Dune* the movie? Are those jerky edits in the gore shots deliberate, or are they the spoor of forced cuts? Why is the title so useless (apart from the fact that the story title was more so)? Is the first word supposed to be an imperative? It's okay to ask. It's ironic. And under the trappings, it's got an impressive serving of meat.

By contrast, I thought *Dick Tracy* was frankly a stiff, which goes to show how much my judgment's worth. The script had that sort of pale, erased quality of a few rewrites too many: oddities of pacing, uncertainties over the passage and elapse of time, surprises going off half-cocked (like the villain's identity, and the elimination of the rival candidate), and a few really dreadful lines that seem to have been left in because everyone's too tired to argue any more. "Is the enemy of my enemy my friend," &c. — what kind of person would think that was a funny line? "We thought you'd be more comfortable meeting here, in the basement of your girlfriend's apartment, while she's away at work." (Might as well save the pretence and just have them prefix speeches with "INT. DAY".) And while there are some reassuringly familiar Beatty squints, frowns, and eyebrow movements, it's hard to find much zing in any of such adult performances as aren't prosthetically assisted.



'Total Recall' Guild Film Distribution

No doubt a lot of the problem is just that the only *Tracy* strips I, or most this side, have ever seen are old *Mad* spoofs, giving the character the elusive flavour of one of those secondhand myths you absorb in childhood, like prep school or Tootsie Rolls. It's one thing to recognize an icon of a squinty-eyed plod with a bleeper on his wrist and a honker that could punch open beers, but quite another to imagine what he actually does. It's certainly a bit startling to hear him addressed either as "Dick" (when they absolutely can't avoid it, given that he dresses like a right one) or, far worse, "Tracy." And I'm sure the largely inadvertent parallels in plot and stylistics with *Batman* haven't helped the attempt to seem more than just a cynical replicant. It's a very unhappy likeness, because *Batman* knocks spots in all the areas where comparison is legitimate, marketing included. A batlogo on your shirt said "I am a dark, unfathomable, and infinitely resourceful person of the night," and presumably that's why quite cool people can still occasionally be seen wearing them. But what does a silhouette of Warren Beatty sniffing his wrist say? "I am so faded and wrinkly that I cannot be directly lit, and furthermore I like talking to my arm"?

But somebody knows quite a lot about dressing stiffs, and there's plenty enough about *Tracy* (tnh-hnh! sssh...) that would be philistine to write off. The villains, of course, are gorgeous, despite the persistently queasy implication that bad blood expresses itself in a subspecies of moral mutants — fine in heavily stylized graphics, unnerving to see in cold light. Hoffman, especially, light-fingeredly walks away with the picture in fewer scenes than Joker Jack had changes of expression. The process-colour look is bold, if not particularly or even remotely comiclike, and the packaging and

promotion have ended up if anything rather more interesting than the film, a kind of merchandizing exoskeleton with some inspired iconography if little in the way of mythic aura. It's still nailed to the perch, to be honest; but at least it stands up, eh Mrs? I shouldn't be surprised if it pulls the heavier score.

Tube Corn TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

What is wrong with science programmes? The split between arts and sciences built into the British education system means that most of us have to choose ridiculously early in life whether we want to pose around discussing existentialism and semiotics or go instead for the large quantities of real ale and bizarre taste in sweaters that seem to be mandatory if you admit to knowing one end of a screwdriver from another. So there must, surely, be a vast untapped audience of otherwise intelligent people who nevertheless have always failed to get to grips with basic scientific concepts and ought to be falling over themselves to watch well-produced TV programmes that would fill in the gaps in their education. As a former arts student myself I am well aware that, in spite of the moon landings, articles in the Sunday papers and all this science fiction I nevertheless can't answer the question C.S. Lewis poses in *Out of the Silent Planet* — since light and heat come from the sun, why is space dark and cold?

Unfortunately the sensation of watching TV science is more accurately captured in that *Not the Nine O'Clock News* sketch of a *Tomorrow's*

World presenter talking very slowly and clearly about a ludicrous headband and lamp arrangement designed to alert a deaf Rowan Atkinson to the ringing of his telephone, the punchline being when the phone does ring and the headband lamp flashes he smiles happily, answers the phone, but still of course can't hear what his caller is saying. Gee whizz, and so what? *Blue Peter* for grown-ups, *Tomorrow's World* used to get an audience largely I would guess from being scheduled next to *Top of the Pops* and therefore watched by people for whom the *Blue Peter* delivery evoked recent nostalgia rather than profound irritation at being patronized with their information. Although the presenters have varied over the years in patronage content, and have been called upon to participate in their own vision of the future by performing experiments or at least switching on the various gadgets they were describing live on air, still it has

the programme's intent, but nonetheless I found it irritating to have wild speculation on what might be the situation a decade hence presented as a deadpan news report from a viewpoint ten years on and then bounced off a banal article on some eco-shock piece that no-one who has escaped *Blue Peter*'s benign influence can possibly have failed to take on board (unless they are a member of the Cabinet).

And does a young audience really have a ten-second attention span anyway? Many critics said that *Back to the Future 2* was too dense to take in at one sitting but I found it to be unbearably slow, explaining its plot so carefully so often I wanted to scream (the Doc took out a blackboard and literally drew us a diagram, for goodness' sake!). It is true that often television is used as background, wallpaper, in the way that radio was by a previous generation, but this is because audiences are used to reading denser texts than

— some idiotic chap in a pvc balaclava spouting on about the wonders of food in tubes you can suck in zero gravity — is used for its naff humour. Look at these bozos! They actually believed you could put a man on the moon! How lucky we are today — not only do we wear hip clothes but we also know that all science can do for you is screw up the ozone layer and fail to cure AIDS. The perception of science as an engine of the marvels of the future is being lost, and the perception of the scientist as polluter and destroyer is becoming a commonplace. Remember the advert that begins "Who was the first man on the moon?" and then, having got your attention, asks "Who was the second?" *Things to Come* is aimed at an audience who didn't automatically go "Edwin (Buzz) Aldrin, of course. And Mike Collins in orbit." All those years of *Blue Peter* brainwashing have paid off in a generation who don't know, don't care and don't trust any answers from a scientist either.

BBC2's *Horizon* still produces the occasional exemplary programme like *Signs of Life*, on the possibilities of creating a kind of "life" within computer systems. This was essentially talking heads (including that of sf writer Rudy Rucker), but they had interesting things to say and were illustrated by perfect computer pictures transferred directly to the screen — which gave all the pleasure of watching fractals or those wiggly things you get out of the so-called "Game of Life" without the fuss of having to spend three hours trying to get your computer system to work. It almost made me want to go out and replace my Hercules monitor with an EGA. Unfortunately by the time this piece appears the programme will have gone wherever dead programmes go, so there is little point my raving about it. But is it not time that there was an equivalent requirement for broadcast material to the requirement for publishers to deposit a copy of their books in national libraries? Did you know the BBC wiped the tape of their broadcast of the moon landings? Sorry, Buzz. And why is space dark and cold?

The presenters of 'Things to Come' (Channel 4)



always been hard to listen with ungritted teeth, and the proportion of explanation to gee-whizzery has been relatively low.

Channel Four's attempt at the same sort of "soft" science programme, (look at the goodies you'll have soon rather than look at how the goodies you already have work) is *Things to Come*, 13 Thursdays from 10 May 1990. Unfortunately this programme is "particularly targeted for young people," which in televisual terms has come to mean fragments and semi-chaotic in honour of the ten-second attention span assumed to be all anyone under thirty can bear to spend on one concept. Two presenters, Malcolm Bennett and Penny Southgate, attempt to do for science or at least futurology what Muriel Gray, Paula Yates and Jools Holland did for rock in *The Tube*. However the apparent chaos is a style feature rather than a true reflection of

television usually offers: adverts and rock videos especially rely on us being able to take in music, plot, image and parodic references to other images simultaneously. Density, however, is not the same as brevity and perhaps *Things to Come* suffers from this fallacy as much as the other "yoof" programmes that have come and gone with such depressing regularity in the last few years. A swift cut from a Barbie anniversary to a cod "videocan" to mum from Moonbase to "coming next week" is not providing a text dense enough to command attention but is merely an attempt to disguise lack of depth by moving quickly.

There is, however, a "happening now" feel to *Things to Come* which should worry us because it is, ultimately, hostile to science *per se*. Pictures of the future are done in grim eco-disaster terms and straight out of *Mad Max* or else fifties and sixties film

BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5, 7, 16 and 17). They cost £2.30 each inland (postage included), or £2.50 each overseas (USA: \$4 sea mail, or \$5 air mail). However, UK purchasers who buy three or more in one order may have them at £1.95 each (i.e. post free).

A Matter of Survival

Chris Beckett

It was snowing hard as they approached the frontier, four figures in padded white suits trudging along a high mountain path. There was no sign of human habitation, no animals, no vegetation even – except for a bit of tussocky grass here and there and some low wiry shrubs. The world of fields and villages and people was hidden far below.

The four were soldiers. Each had a heavy pack and an automatic rifle, and each carried part of a larger weapon which had been dismantled to allow them to port it through this difficult terrain. It was a rocket launcher that fired radar-guided missiles.

The path they followed was no more than a goat track. The only real road through this stretch of the Zagorian mountains – itself very small and little used – was half a kilometre below and hidden from them by a ridge. It was only just before the frontier that they came to a short gap in the ridge, so that they could look down and see the road beneath.

They expected to see it empty. Very little traffic crossed the frontier. The enemy's border patrols did not normally come down this far and their own side did not run to regular patrols. But when they looked down they saw two trucks parked there, and minuscule figures in snow suits like their own moving around, involved in some sort of transaction.

One of the vehicles was small, shabby and at least twenty years old. From it there emerged a group of even smaller figures: little children, a dozen of them. They were led by the adult figures over to the second vehicle, which was large and new. This was clearly an encounter between a wealthy and powerful group and a weak and impoverished one. From the larger truck a single object was produced, a silvery cylindrical thing about the size of a side-drum. It was a vacuum flask of the kind used to transport batches of frozen material.

The flask was handed over to the other group – and this seemed to complete the exchange, because everyone started to climb back into the lorries. But the four observers did not stay to watch. As soon as they saw there were people below, they hurried to get back behind the shelter of the ridge.

Nevertheless all four had understood exactly what was going on down there. The existence of little transactions of that kind was central to the purpose of their mission.

After another half-hour of walking they came to the frontier itself. Incredibly enough, the enemy had laid a barbed-wire fence along it, even up here among the crags and the snow. But,

though it was difficult to cross, it bore no comparison with the three-metre-high electrified fences which protected the border at lower altitudes. All four managed to crawl underneath it, throwing their packs and equipment over the top. At times like this you were very vulnerable, and the soldiers were glad of the foul weather, which reduced visibility and would almost certainly keep the enemy's helicopter gunships out of the air.

Clambering back down to the goat track, they continued on their way. Darkness would be falling soon and they needed to get to the place where they would spend the night.

It was a small cave, invisible from the air and from the path. Previous clandestine expeditions had discovered it while reconnoitering the territory, and more recently a scout party had come up here and stocked it with provisions specifically for their mission. They crawled inside gratefully. It was not warm but it was fairly dry, and among the equipment that had been left for them was a chemically-powered heater and some plastic sheeting which could be used to close the opening of the cave.

They stowed their weapons, took off their packs and one by one pulled back the hoods of their snow suits to reveal the faces of women – three of them quite young, the fourth approaching middle age. They spent some time kissing, hugging and rubbing one another's limbs and backs. "Poor Maroulla, how tired you look." "Oh, that is good Zenda." "Mouse, dear, come and help me with this heater." "Yes Sammy, but just rub my shoulders for a minute, they are so sore."

Maroulla was the older one, with a handsome face deeply etched by hardship and struggle. Her dark, greying hair was cropped close to her skull. She was a sort of leader to this expedition, by far the most experienced, and the strain of responsibility showed in her face. Twice during the day she had nearly lost the way in the snow. The others didn't know that.

When they had unpacked their provisions they settled down around the heater. Zenda and Mouse cuddled up together while they ate. Like Maroulla, they were both from this part of the world. But they were young and unsophisticated, coming from peasant homes in small mountain villages. Zenda was rather tall and wiry with sharp, inquisitive, slightly mocking eyes. Mouse was pretty and small, and inclined to play the part of a child, though like the others she was well trained to fight and to kill – and to survive by her own physical agility and her wits.

"Is it really true," asked Zenda, as she finished a

mouthful, "that in New Zealand men and women can move about freely in the same places?"

Sammy smiled. She was the odd one out in this group. She came not from Epirus but from a strange country on the far side of the world, and she had answered this same incredulous question many times since she had arrived in Europe. Even Mouse and Zenda seemed to need to ask it again and again.

"Yes, it's true. New Zealand is still one country. If you walk down the street in Wellington you see women and men using the same pavements and going in and out of the same shops."

Mouse's eyes bulged in fascinated horror. "But how do you bear it?"

"Well, of course we don't like it, and many of us in New Zealand are working hard to achieve a proper separation. But you know we don't have much to do with men even now. It is just like Europe was in the years leading up to the Partition. Most women have already turned to other women and get pregnant by DI, so they are already separatists in that sense. And nearly all the men have turned to...well, *machines* – cars, erogenators...you know, all the things that men do turn to..."

Zenda said: "But it must be horrible just to see them around, with that awful *hair* and those gruff voices that sound like bears..."

Sammy was a bright, lively former journalist, who had shelved a promising career in the New Zealand Women's Press in order to come and fight in Europe as a volunteer. She had come because she believed in the separatist cause, a struggle in which European women formed the vanguard. And yet, though she often criticized the backwardness of her own country, she sometimes resented criticism from others.

"We separatists are working towards formal partition," she said firmly, "but we're determined to get a better deal than you got in Europe. Your cantons make up less than a quarter of the total landmass of Europe, even though you have more than half the population. And they've managed to split you up in dozens of little enclaves, while they're united under the flag of the EC and can drive from Calais to Tomsk without ever leaving their own territory..." (She was quoting now from an article she'd recently sent back to New Zealand.) "And what's more, they've left you with all the worst agricultural land. No, when we get partition it's going to be on fair terms: the whole North Island for us, the whole South Island for them."

"I hope you succeed," Maroulla said with a weary smile. "But you've got to remember that they have much more power. At the time of partition, almost all the weapons in Europe were in the hands of men, and the vast majority of technical skills too. That didn't leave us in a very strong position to insist on an equitable share-out. The only card we had in our hands was that they wanted to see the back of us. I don't suppose it's so very different in New Zealand, is it?"

Sammy's jaw set determinedly. "Yes, but only we can bear the boy children for them. If they don't give us what we want, we'll stop giving them the boys."

Maroulla said: "Ah but that's different. We have to give them the boys or they wouldn't give us their seed. In that respect we have a perfect parity of need: neither can do without the other. That's how we got

the Reproduction Treaty out of them – and that's why they let us survive. But when it comes to dividing up land and resources, well, that's another matter: history has given them all the trump cards."

Sammy shook her head but said nothing. She had an unpleasant feeling that Maroulla was right.

"Do you really think that's the only reason they let us survive?" Mouse said.

"Absolutely!" said Sammy, anxious now to prove that she was not in any way naïve. "They hate and fear us. If they didn't need us to produce boy children, they would annex our territory, take away our rights and slowly exterminate us."

Maroulla nodded emphatically. "That's why this mission is so vital."

"But it's so *unfair*!" Mouse began to cry.

"Mouse darling," Zenda put her arms round Mouse and kissed her on the lips, until she too dissolved into tears. And Maroulla started to cry as well.

Gradually they fell to talking about pleasanter things: women they knew, sisters and mothers, love affairs started and finished, babies born, illnesses and sufferings endured – and the intricate, bitter and fascinating disputes between the various women's cantons. They giggled over the funny bits, wept over the sad ones and were constantly comforting and tending to one another if any one of them was particularly distressed or moved.

These women without men were so completely wrapped up in their feelings. Though she did not admit it to herself, Sammy was made to feel slightly uncomfortable by this constant show of emotion.

But she was a dedicated separatist and she quickly suppressed such thoughts.

Outside the snow continued to fall.

The women took it in turns to keep watch through the night, while the others tried to sleep, wrapped in one another's arms for warmth and comfort.

As the dawn broke over the mountains, the thin man woke and got out of bed. He pulled a long-sleeved gown over his shaven head. The room was bleak, monastic even, the plaster on the walls unpainted, the electric light unmuted by any kind of lampshade.

He went to the bathroom and splashed water over his face. His name was Ulysses. He was brilliant. At 25 he was the director of the Hydra Institute, a secret research project funded by the Defence Commissioner of the European Community.

He used the toilet and then went into the small room next to the bathroom to relieve another physical need. As he shut the door and picked up the handsets, the Erogenator at once produced for him the visual, tactile and olfactory phantom that was his current sexual partner, a blonde hermaphroditic creature called Sweetie with a cute snub nose and enormous eyes. Glancing at his watch, Ulysses peremptorily sodomized Sweetie over the edge of the couch.

As he left the Erogenator he might have noticed a wave of sadness pass over him, if it had not been a feeling for which he had no words, no concept. (He had been brought up, largely by robots, to think of the Erogenator as good clean fun – as opposed to sex between men, which spread AIDS). He put the discontented feeling down to boredom with Sweetie, and

made a mental note to himself to reprogramme the machine tonight to create a new partner – or at least get it to recreate Bitch or Dolly or Pretty Boy or another one of his vast library of previous phantom partners.

Opening his freezer, he took out a ham roll and a carton of coffee and chucked them into the microwave, absent-mindedly flicking on the TV. The TV was part of an untidy stack of electronic equipment which was the only other furniture in his room except for the unmade bed. His domestic robot was patiently gathering together the scattered dirty clothing on the floor.

He munched his roll and sipped coffee while the TV showed 3D action replays of last night's gladiatorial contest down at Ioannina. All the stories about that big black Nubian fighter turned out to have been a lot of hype: the local lad disembowelled him in the first twenty minutes without any special difficulty. Naturally the crowd went wild and the commentator said that at least thirty boys were killed in the gang fights afterwards. (A shame, thought Ulysses, I should have made the effort and gone – looks as though I missed a good night).

"Now international news," said the TV presenter. "Ferrari have just brought out their long-awaited Super-Firenze, claimed to be the first of a whole new generation of high-performance jetcars. Its maximum speed is 260 kph under autostrada conditions..." (Ulysses, this brilliant young scientist, punched the air excitedly as the silvery machine streaked towards him out of the screen. "Wow! Sweet!" he shouted aloud.)

The news bulletin finished with a joke item from Germany. It seemed that a women's canton in the Hertz mountains was complaining that its water supply had been adversely affected by a new hydroelectric project just beyond its frontiers. ("Tough shit, girls!" Ulysses shouted out at the screen, hooting with derisive laughter.) With many humorous asides, the newscast showed a delegation of the women trying to negotiate with representatives of the German government.

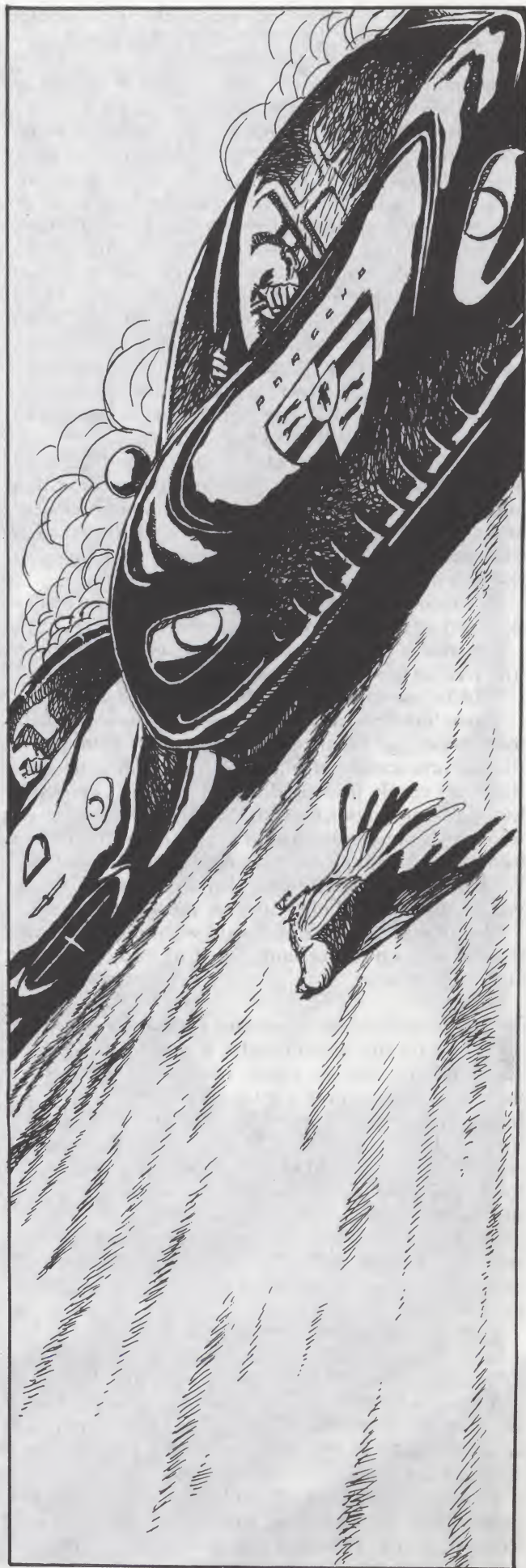
How strange it always felt to see women. Ulysses had no words to describe the mixture of emotions they evoked, otherwise he might have identified inside himself feelings of envy, of longing, of fear. There was something attractive about them, of course, you could not deny that. But it was only their bodies that were interesting (wasn't it?) and the best of them were very imperfect compared with the things that even a cheap Erogenerator could produce.

(Ulysses' erogenerator, needless to say, was state-of-the-art.)

Then Ulysses laughed harshly. To see these tenth-rate Erogenerator phantoms sitting down round a table and trying to be treated seriously as people, well, that was just too ridiculous. You could tell that the German government representatives were barely able to restrain their laughter...

Somewhat cheered by this image he flicked off the set, grabbed his briefcase, and made for his jetcar outside...

The four women soldiers had been up for more than two hours, making their way warily across the fallen snow, trying as far as possible to avoid leaving tracks which could be spotted from



Illustrations by Martin Perrott

overhead. The air was clear and still and the going was much warmer than yesterday. One by one the women had pulled off their hoods.

At about 10 a.m. they rounded a corner in the mountains and were suddenly confronted with – a man.

It was an old man, a shepherd, who was mending some sheep pens in preparation for bringing his flock up to the summer pastures. He was smoking an old-fashioned nicotine cigarette, whose acrid smell wafted towards them through the sharp mountain air, and he was singing to himself in a thin neighing voice: "Oh Margarita, your lips are sweeter than the finest wine, your eyes are like beautiful pools. If you will not have me I swear I will die. How can you be so cruel to me? Oh Margarita, Margarita..." He must have been old enough to have lived before the partition, and when he looked up and saw the women, his reaction was one of pleasure, not fear. He started to make some gesture of greeting – or surprise.

Maroulla felled him with a two-second burst of automatic fire, then ran over to finish him off with a bullet through the head. Sammy ran after her, sickened and appalled, screaming out and begging her to stop. She had received a thorough commando training but she had never seen a real person die.

"My God, Maroulla, was that really necessary? The poor old guy didn't mean us any harm."

"He was a man," Maroulla snapped. "If we'd let him live he would have betrayed us."

"But he was old – he didn't mean any harm."

Maroulla turned and took Sammy by the shoulders, tears streaming down her face: "Haven't you forgotten the importance of our mission? If we don't succeed, they will surely destroy all of us: here in Greece, in Europe, everywhere, even in your own New Zealand, whether or not you have your own cantons there. You told Mouse that yourself last night. I don't like killing. Women are not meant to kill. But it's a matter of survival – us against them – and he was one of them."

Meanwhile Mouse and Zenda were pulling down the old man's trousers, and squealing in mock horror at what they saw.

It was nearly dark when they came to their resting place for the second night. It was an abandoned mountain village where narrow streets wound their way up and down between the shells of stone houses, whose walls were now slowly crumbling back into the landscape from which they had been quarried. Here was the old church, here the school, here the village square with the great plane-tree still growing in its centre. A wooden signboard lay on the ground on which the Greek letters could still just be read: "G. Papadopoulos – Café and General Stores." But it was a hundred years since anyone had lived here.

The women walked through the snowy streets in silence. It was an eerie place. The presence of the old inhabitants was still very strong, as if they had only just departed – and yet at the time they had lived here things had been very different from now: men and women had lived together, shared the same houses, spoken to one another in the streets...

And it was hard not to be a little wistful about the past, hard not to feel that something had been lost from the world. It was in reaction to this mood that

Maroulla suddenly spoke out: "Just think how many women must have suffered here, how many were beaten or abused, the disgusting humiliations they had to endure in order to have the seeds of their children planted inside them..."

Zenda and Mouse gave little snorts of mingled disgust and amusement. Sammy kept silent.

Again, the scout parties had been before them, and left supplies hidden in an old cellar under the ruins of one of the village's largest houses. Again, the four commandos pulled off their packs. Mouse and Zenda exchanged deep kisses, with tongues and sighing. Feeling left out of this, Sammy turned to Maroulla for a hug.

It was quite unlikely that any of them would return from this expedition alive. For Sammy at least, this fact had only just sunk in. When she had volunteered to serve in the Women's International Brigade back in New Zealand it had been a high-minded gesture, made without real understanding of what it would mean to kill or to risk being killed. Her separatist convictions had not changed, and yet there was a part of her that was quite critical of these canonized European women, part of her that did not want to die for them.

She pulled away from Maroulla and turned to unpack the provisions.

"One thing I meant to ask you, Zenda," she said. "You know you said you couldn't understand how New Zealand women managed to live alongside men? Well many New Zealand women would want to ask you a similar question. How can you bear to give up all your boy babies?"

Mouse laughed: "Horrible little things, we're only too glad to get rid of them."

"Too right!" said Zenda. But she and Mouse were young and neither had yet had any children.

Maroulla had. "I had four boys," she said. "I went on going back to the seedswoman because I hoped to have a girl, but I never did. And that did make it hard giving up my boy babies. You get through it by reminding yourself what they are. They only look like us. Inside they are not like us at all. Even at that age they have needs and desires hidden inside them that are totally alien. They are alien beings."

"But they are still your children – flesh of your flesh!"

Maroulla smiled ruefully. "Well, it can be difficult. The funny thing is – of my four boys, the one I found hardest to part with was not the best-looking one, or the one who looked most like me. It was the one who was slightly deformed. Somehow that made him seem more of an individual. I must admit I cried a bit when the seedswoman took him off to the border."

"What was wrong with him?" Sammy asked.

"Nothing really serious. He just had a bad wine-stain, all down the left-hand side of his face. Men are so cruel. I didn't like to hand over a child who could so easily be mocked. Silly of me really – after all, he was only a boy."

Maroulla ripped open a packet of food. "Anyway that was many years ago. I got over it soon enough – and of course it had to be done."

They drew lots for the night's watches. Zenda was first, then Mouse, then Maroulla. It was Sammy who saw the dawn break over the ruined village.

In his long black Porsche, Ulysses cruised the two kilometres or so down to the Ioannina-Tirana expressway, headed up the slip road – and switched in the turbojet. As the car rocketed up to 200kph and the inertial forces squeezed him back into his seat, Ulysses' face became slack and dreamy, as if he had just squirted heroin into a main artery. The heat of his jet-stream shimmered in his rear-view mirror and piston-engined vehicles dropped behind him like so many pedestrians. He eyed the road ahead hungrily, impatient for the thrill of a race.

One of the troubles with being rich and having a beautiful car was that most other cars ceased to provide interesting competition. A few other drivers did half-heartedly try to take up the challenge of his bullet-like speed – one in a Saab even briefly managed to overtake him – but it was ridiculously easy to get back in the lead and leave the worthy but boring Swedish motor disappearing into the haze of his jet-stream.

And then he saw the red Thunderbird up ahead. He knew at once that he'd met a real adversary. The machine was as powerful and immaculate as his own, its red skin gleamed, the air behind it was a shimmering haze; it was being driven very fast and with style. Just as Ulysses drew near, the red car slipped past a cluster of trucks by overtaking on the inside at 200 kph and using the hard shoulder.

Laughing, Ulysses slipped his Porsche through the same gap. When the Thunderbird pulled out in front of the lorries, Ulysses continued on the same line at full throttle, passing the other driver on the inside.

He nearly came to grief, though. As he should have remembered, the road at this point started to wind up into the mountains and there was a sharp curve which it was not possible to take at 216 kph. Lurching wildly across the road, he slammed on the brakes. The T-bird hurtled past him.

"No you don't," Ulysses murmured, roaring forward. And there followed twenty glorious minutes of non-stop battle on the twists and turns of the mountain road – overtaking on blind corners, dodging trucks and piston cars, swerving precariously away from precipices...

Ulysses laughed and shouted aloud at his rival: "Bastard! Shithead! Womankisser!" And sometimes he caught a glimpse of the other's face as they passed, as wild and exultant as his own. What a guy!

Ulysses was a daily commuter on this road, and in the end his superior knowledge paid off. In a tunnel, approaching a particularly sharp concealed corner, he shifted over to one side so as to tempt the T-bird driver into trying to slip past.

Sure enough, he fell for it! Ulysses pulled back, smiling, and watched the T-bird burst forth from the tunnel to be suddenly confronted by a flimsy barrier and blue empty space.

The red jetcar swerved desperately away from the void, but it was going too fast. It smashed sideways through the barrier and plunged down a hundred metres to explode spectacularly on the bare rocks below...

That was wonderful! That really made his day! He felt warm and glowing inside, and there was a lovely blood-red haze in front of his eyes as he roared on through the sunny morning. He had won, he had



killed, he had defeated a worthy rival. He shouted and laughed aloud.

Soon he reached his turning, and headed up the side road that led to the Institute.

“Well,” said Maroulla, “there it is.”

The four women looked out from a stony ridge at their destination. In the middle of a small bare valley, there was a cube-shaped building, surrounded by high fences, soldiers, guard-dog patrols.

Sammy took out her binoculars, and slowly scanned the scene. How small and inconsequential it looked, up here among the huge mountain peaks.

“What nonsense it all is, in a way, isn’t it?” she said. “What does it all really matter?”

Maroulla turned on her. “Sammy, for goodness’ sake, nothing could matter more. Remember what this is. This is a place where they are learning to make babies from their own body-cells. As soon as they find that out they won’t need us in the world any more and they will destroy us. Remember how they hate us. Remember that this is a wicked violation of the Reproduction Treaty. Remember what they did when a few of us broke the Treaty – those poor women in that village in France who kept back a few of their boy children. Not only did the French men bomb and burn their village to the ground, but they bombed and burned every village in the whole canton. We must destroy this place. It’s a matter of survival.”

Sammy laughed, feeling strangely at peace. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to pull out now.”

Maroulla kissed her. “None of us wants to kill, dear, not even to kill men.”

Mouse and Zenda were setting up the rocket launcher. It was a sophisticated weapon which could deliver rockets with pinpoint accuracy by guiding them along its radar beam. Needless to say, the launcher and the rockets were the work of men. It had been stolen from the men – or rather bought from a renegade, for a vast sum of money equivalent to the entire annual budget of the Epirus cantons. The money had been contributed by WI women throughout the world.

But women had developed the rocket warheads. Each was packed with an explosive called *Femtex*, which had almost nuclear destructive powers. A group of the finest women chemists in the world had been brought together at Bern to concoct it. It was surely the only weapon of war in history to be invented exclusively by women.

“Right,” said Maroulla, “get ready to fire.”

“Look,” said Sammy, “someone important has just arrived.”

Maroulla glanced at the black Porsche drawing up in front of the Institute. “It’s probably the Director. They say that he only allows his own genes to be used in the experiments.” She raised her binoculars to her eyes. “As soon as you’re ready, fire,” she said.

Mouse lifted the launcher up onto Zenda’s shoulders. Zenda squinted down the eyepiece, closing her finger on the trigger.

Suddenly Maroulla screamed, “STOP!”

She lunged forward, throwing Zenda off balance and sending the rocket blasting off at a crazy angle to explode among the peaks.

Maroulla looked round wildly at the incredulous and despairing faces of the three companions who had placed so much trust in her calm wisdom. She began to laugh hysterically.

“His face,” she kept gasping. “His face...”

Because she had seen the face of Ulysses, and the purple birthmark that disfigured the whole of its left side.

Sammy held Maroulla down, so that the others could fire the second rocket.

The building and the guards and the Porsche and the piebald man... all were engulfed in flame.

Maroulla wept. She didn’t know that when Ulysses had looked up and seen the women who were about to destroy him he had laughed. Suddenly it had seemed to him that here was the real thing – better than car chases and gladiator fights – this was the only real contest in the world.

Chris Beckett makes his debut as a writer of fiction with the above story, a variation on the “Sex Wars” theme (see IZ 29 for examples by other authors). He is a social worker by profession, and lives in Cambridge. He has also contributed non-fiction pieces to *New Scientist* magazine.

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Beyond Science Fiction

Charles Platt

Unlike Bruce Sterling (whose columns now alternate with mine in *Interzone*), I lack the authority to tell readers what they ought to be reading. Alas, I am not the prophet of a literary movement; my fiction has not been nominated for awards; I don't even have a picture of myself taken from a TV screen to enhance my image as a sage seer of sci-fi.

Thus I can only watch with awe and chagrin as Chairman Bruce fills his column (in the July *Interzone*) by the simple expedient of pulling a book off the shelf and describing some randomly selected pages. Such noblesse is not for the likes of me; but it got me thinking. Just suppose I was important enough to do that kind of thing – which book would I choose?

Ten or fifteen years ago, it would have been a science-fiction book. But now, I'm not so sure. At this point, the books that excite me most and give me those special thrills of other-worldly strangeness aren't science fiction at all.

Equator by Thurston Clarke, for example. This brilliant tour-de-force is a travelogue through the most desolate, deforested, deranged, depopulated, deprived townships and islands situated on or near the equator. Here you will find totally alien landscapes peopled by strange hominids who think and speak in ways we can only begin to understand. Clarke's text creates a sense of total realism, making me feel I was a passenger hitching a ride on his expeditions into the furthest reaches of primitivism. When was the last time you read an alien-contact novel as vivid as that?

Then there's *Perfect Victim* by Christine McGuire and Carla Norton, the true story (co-written by a district attorney who prosecuted the case) of Cameron Hooker, a suburban American who was obsessed with the idea of owning a sex-slave. When he became bored with his daydreams, he livened them up by going out and putting them into practice. Assisted by his wife, he kidnapped a young woman named Colleen Stan and held her captive, first in a basement equipped with torture devices, later in a small space under his custom-built platform bed.

After a few years of this, Colleen adjusted so well to her life of tyranny

and abuse that she wrote love letters to Hooker and got him to take her to visit her parents. In the end, though, she teamed up with his wife and turned him in. Commenting that Hooker was "the most dangerous psychopath I have ever dealt with," the judge sentenced him to more than 100 years in jail.

Anyone who complains about "cardboard characters" in science fiction could try this book as an antidote. It demonstrates that Smalltown USA can be the most alien landscape of all; and it illuminates some of the murkiest depths of male and female behaviour.

So does *Cops* by Mark Baker. This one may not be available in England, so I won't dwell on it; but here, in their own words, are all the most extreme acts and situations you ever imagined that the police might be involved in. More horrific than a horror novel. More fantastic than a fantasy novel. Probably funnier than Terry Pratchett, depending on your sense of the absurd.

Lastly, if you crave the experience of visiting an alternate universe, you could peruse *Racial Loyalty*, a newspaper so nasty than even the Ku Klux Klan has gone on record condemning it for going a bit too far.

Published by the Church of the Creator in North Carolina, *Racial Loyalty* warns that "mud races" (a term embracing Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, and Asians, among others) are threatening to destroy the proud heritage established by Nordic-whites the world over. If you have a suitably Aryan name, you could probably get the Church of the Creator to send you your own copy of these ravings for a minimal price. You'll find, incidentally, that these racist maniacs are atheists – because Christ was a Jew, right? The "creator" they worship is the White archetype, building a better tomorrow.

Philip K. Dick never wrote anything so bizarre.

My point is this: that if science fiction is supposed to be taking us on amazing, fantastic, thrilling adventures, it isn't really doing its job.

Some critics have suggested that the problem with modern science fiction is that it has been overtaken by develop-

ments in science and technology. I think this is missing the point. We still have a hardcore minority of writers using authentic science in their work (Benford, Bear, Sheffield, and others). On the other hand, I can't think of *any* one publishing work that has the grippingly vivid sense of place, the wild characters involved in larger-than-life intrigue, or the sense of modified reality inherent in the sources I have listed above.

One reason may be that publishers prefer to avoid such "extreme" material. Yet they publish it readily – eagerly – when they can categorize it outside of science fiction. This must mean that they feel sf readers don't want to deal with adult, disturbing themes. In which case, assuming the publishers are correct, sf readers are actually more conservative than the general public.

Can it be so? Am I missing the point somewhere?

True, serious science-fiction writers can claim that they tackle themes which the "average" reader in the mainstream would find difficult. I'm thinking of relatively technical concepts such as black holes, asteroid mining, or molecular biology.

But not many writers really dig down into the heavily technical stuff; and in case, the general public is becoming more savvy about these kinds of topics all the time. Twenty years ago, you could claim that science fiction stretched the faculties and the credulity of the average reader. But not any more.

The real core of the matter is that concepts which used to seem challenging aren't quite as challenging as they used to be; and the stories built around these concepts tend to be a bit predictable. Hard science fiction has its routine plot elements (the competent engineer, the mysterious alien artifact) just like heroic fantasy (the omniscient wizard, the mysterious fortress).

Overall (with the exception of some "cyberpunk" material and odd publications such as *Interzone*) science fiction hasn't so much been overtaken by real-life science. It's been overtaken by real life. While we hunker down in our comfortable little world of sci-fi jargon and make-believe, the world has been getting stranger, and modern

investigative journalists have been portraying its strangeness in unflinching, graphic detail.

Consequently, when I want a dose of the sense of wonder that science fiction is famous for, I now turn to non-science fiction in order to find it.

(Charles Platt)

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Culprits or, Where are they Now?

Kim Newman, Neil Gaiman & Eugene Byrne

Sometimes, people vanish from the front pages and are never heard from again. We've spent years tracking down your childhood heroes, and can now exclusively reveal the truth about where they've been and what they've been doing since their heyday in the '50s and '60s...

THE PRISONER

...after escaping, Number Six spent two weeks on the outside, watching TV, reading the papers, eating convenience food, and trying to get a job. Ever since then, he has been trying to find his way back to the Village. Current whereabouts unknown.

JOE 90

...is now Joe Early-Thirties. At the age of 13, he was given the mind of a womanizing alcoholic who is also the world's greatest darts player so that he could carry out a mission that required darts-playing prowess. One of these days he'll complete the mission.

YOGI BEAR

...went to meet the Maharishi in 1969, and is now known as the Yogi Yogi Bear.

CAPTAIN SCARLET

...was cashiered for crashing one Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle too many at the end of the Mysterion War. The Mysterions are now our closest friends and biggest trading partners. And they make such bloody good stereo: you can kick 'em, you can stomp on 'em, but they'll still play your Barry Gray records, because they're indestructible. After his divorce from Harmony, Melody, Rhapsody and Destiny Angels, Captain Scarlet, who has now reverted to his original name of Paul, nowadays hangs around in bars, drinking himself stupid, smoking 100 a day, and nurturing a serious crack habit. He invites total strangers to shoot him in the head, take a swing at him or run him over. After all, he is bloody indestructible, isn't he?

HECTOR

...following eviction for failure to keep up the mortgage repayments on his ex-Council House, Hector, Kiki and the other one are now living in Hector's Squat.

BATMAN

...millionaire Bruce Wayne left Gotham City under a cloud in the early '70s shortly after Commissioner Gordon was impeached for accepting 100,000 herring from the Penguin for looking the other way while the wily bird walked off with the World Trade Centre. Later, when it was revealed that the Wayne Foundation had been secretly siphoning money and Russian utility belts to Nicaragua in exchange for bananas and bat guano (a vital propellant fuel used in batmobiles), Bruce set up home in San Francisco under the name of Bruce Batt, popularly known as Fruit Batt. His cabaret bar and health food experience, the Kape and Kowl Kavern Klub, is very popular. He is unwilling to talk about his previous career as a freelance law-enforcement specialist. Bruce is still into tights and masks, but now weighs over three hundred pounds, and rents out the batmobile for weddings, barmitzvahs and divorces. His ward, Dick Grayson, now Mohammed Ach'med B'zimbo Grayson, has been elected to San Francisco City Hall, representing the Leather Community. Alfred the butler is now the sole occupant of the Wayne Foundation Home for Elderly British Ham Actors.

The Penguin is currently a whaler working for the Japanese government, specializing in the harpooning of particularly rare breeds. The Joker was recently appointed editor of British humour magazine *Punch*. The Riddler left a mysterious note: "Who has a secret hide-out at 95 W. 105th Street, Gotham City, wears a green costume, giggles a lot and robs banks?" No-one has been able to crack this fiendishly brilliant conundrum, and the arch criminal remains at large. The Catwoman joined the cast of *Dynasty*, and was briefly married at different times to Patrick Mower, Dolph Lundgren and Brigitte Nielson.

MR SPOCK

...when Starfleet was privatized, Mr Spock was sold off to the Acme Rodeo and Double Glazing Company of Altair V. He wrote an awful lot of very bad poetry which he was unable to get published. A sample reads:

You ask me why
I raise my eyebrow at you?
What I am really trying to say

Is fuck off, you round-eared, patronizing,

Warm-blooded, single-hearted, human wanker.

When his controversial autobiography *Five Years in a Tin Can Boldly Going Crazy With a Load of Patronizing Human Bastards* was published, Spock was recognized as a leading Vulcan rights activist. He ran for galactic dictator on the Throw All the Stinking Human Beings Out of the Galaxy ticket. In conjunction with the Klingons, the Romulans, the Daleks and the Clangers, he wanted to exterminate all the human beings in the universe and declare himself supreme ruler of everything. He later had his ears extended by plastic surgery and directed several films about babies.

FRANCIS THE TALKING MULE

...now Francis the Talking Big Mac.

TINTIN

...is now a member of the Légion d'Honneur and the Académie Française and is a respected columnist for *Le Monde*, where he freely expresses his admiration for Jean-Marie Le Pen, for General Pinochet and for Enoch Powell ("even if he is one of those English bastards"). Captain Haddock choked on a billion blue blistering barnacles during a drinking contest in 1963. The Thompson Twins are now an obscure recording group.

LITTLE PLUM

...is now lobbying Washington for um whole of um Western United States to be returned to um tribe. He and his followers are also demanding that Desperate Dan be portrayed in um history books as um mass-murderer he is now regarded to have been.

CLIFF RICHARD

...Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Joni Mitchell and Mozart are dead. Cliff Richard is not. So how come he claims there is a God?

DR WHO

...died of old age sometime in the late 1960s, and has subsequently been impersonated by a succession of talentless clowns.

SCOOPY DOO

...Scooby Doo and the bunch of hippies in the VW van finally ran into a real ghost, the Stalking Slashing Slime Spectre of Scary Skeleton Swamp. Anticipating that the spook was, as usual, a smuggler in disguise, Scooby tried to rip its mask off. The brave hound died shortly afterwards from multiple disembowelments.

PINKY AND PERKY

...Pinky lives on his own Caribbean island and is currently working on a concept album with his band, Pig Floyd. Perky died in Paris in 1970, reputedly of a drug overdose. He is buried in Montmartre and fans of the combo still flock there every year to lay flowers and kitchen swill on his grave. Pinky has recently bought the rights to all their old TV shows, and has re-sold them to Channel 4 for what is reputedly a "three-figure sum." His duet with Paul McCartney, *Pork and Ivory*, has just gone platinum.

THE FLINTSTONES

...fossil evidence suggests that Fred and Barney were wiped out by encroaching glaciation.

DEPUTY DAWG

...was invalidated out of the police force with a broken toe-bone.

THE VIRGINIAN

...Shiloh and the High Chaparral got into a vicious range war and wiped each other out. Little Plum is currently engaged in litigation to get the land back since it was stolen from the Injuns in the first place. "And we could do with um Ponderosa while we're at it," he says.

ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY MEN

...shortly after swearing he'd never sell out, Robin Hood was robbed by some peasants. He was then persuaded by his accountant that if he carried on robbing the rich and feeding the poor, he would be facing a serious cash-flow crisis in the early 13th century and changed his ways. He is currently a Tory Councillor in Nottingham, and very keen on law and order. Maid Marion now owns the Maid Marion Revuebar, while Friar Tuck runs the Messy Eater Fast Food chain. Alan-a-Dale has a boring folk group, Will Scarlet is fashion correspondent for *Smash Hits* and Much the Miller's Son is currently serving a prison sentence for illegal possession of a longbow.

RANDALL AND HOPKIRK (DECEASED)

...Randall died after being beaten up sometime in 1974. Since that time the firm has been known as "Randall and Hopkirk (Both Dead)." It has not made much money.

THE STAR WARS GANG

...George Lucas was forced to dismantle his film series when a Senate Investigation proved it to be ludicrously expensive, militarily inadvisable, totally unworkable and downright bloody silly.

THE SAINT

...in 1972, Simon Templar assassinated James Bond and took his place. The deception was recently uncovered, and Templar was himself replaced by Prince Barin of Mongo.

FLIPPER

...when the lovable dolphin's series was cancelled, he joined forces with Skippy the Bush Kangaroo, Gentle Ben the Bear, Lassie the dog and Boris the Horse to form SkipFlipLassBenBo Enterprises, the production company which invented Australian soap opera. *Neighbours*, written for an all-animal cast, was bought out by human beings, leaving wombat Jason Donovan as the only survivor of the original pilot. Paul Hogan bought their script for "Crocodile" Dundee, but refused to cast a crocodile in the lead as originally intended. Flipper then organized a crocodile boycott of the film.

THE MUMMY

...following his career slump after *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*, our bandaged buddy found

himself on skid row. As he said at the time, "onshe you get typecast in a part there'sh no way those basthards will let you play Hamlet." Bits of him were seen floating around the Bowery for a while. His attempted comeback as a talkshow host was considered a failure as was his recording of *Midnight at the Oasis*, later a hit for Maria Muldaur. His original single, however, is much prized by Collectors of Records Recorded by Dead Artists That You Can't Hear the Words of Properly. Currently said to be working on his autobiography *Unravell'd!*, which he claims will blow the lid off Universal studios, his left arm recently turned up in a medical curiosity shop in Dead Rat, Arizona.

ROY OF THE ROVERS

...Rovers, currently bottom of the Southern League, have just signed up Roy again in an attempt to reach the middle of the Southern League. Says Roy, 58, "this is a wonderful break for me, for British football, and for the lads, and mine's a pint." Since his retirement from professional football, Roy has been owner of "The Paisley Scarf Rack," a boutique in Melchester's fashionable Arndale Centre.

IRONSIDE

...drowned at Lourdes, 1977.

DAN DARE

...currently living in Tasmania, Group Captain Daniel Dare, RAF, retd. has recently incurred the wrath of the British government by publishing *Space-catcher*, his memoirs. In the book, he alleges that Digby was gay and working for the Mekon.

THE CLANGERS

...wiped out by Darth Vader during the Clone Wars.

BILLY BUNTER

...popular entrepreneur Sir William Bunter lost six stones on a crash diet at the age of 22, and became a multi-millionaire by the time he was 25, through his best-selling book *Yarroo! There Goes the Flab!* His business interests have subsequently diversified, and he now owns Bunter Records, Fat Boy Airlines, Chums Condoms and a chain of fast health-food bars. He is married to former Page-Three girl Samantha Cow and has sworn he will send his children to the nearest comprehensive school, but is thought to have changed his mind when told that they would come home every evening. He lists his sole hobby in *Who's Who* as getting his own back on his old school chums.

THE SPACE FAMILY ROBINSON

...still lost.

THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN

...Steve Austin has been rusting away on a government tip since the SALT talks negotiated away America's bionics programme. Parts of him have been recycled into a Sony Walkman due to governmental cutbacks. He still hadn't paid that hospital bill.

DR KILDARE

...when it was discovered that "Dr" Kildare had in fact no formal medical qualifications but was a hair-dresser from Dead Rat, Arizona, he was thrown out

of Blair hospital. He moved to Peyton Place, New Hampshire, where he worked as a dentist before joining the priesthood. He has recently been seen loitering suspiciously at the site of several natural disasters.

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

...after masterminding the Watergate break-in, the Iranian hostages rescue mission, the Rainbow Warrior sabotage, and the assassination of Salman Rushdie, Jim Phelps and his team – Rollin Hand, Cinnamon, Barney and Ollie North – went into retirement.

ALIAS SMITH AND JONES

...when the Governor explained that his offer of a pardon was "just my little joke, boys," Hannibal Hayes held the old boy down while Kid Curry shot him. Several times. Then Kid Curry held the Governor down while Hannibal Hayes shot him. Then they went back to their old job of robbing banks and trains, but this time they shot as many people as they could just to make up for all those years of being stupid. Died in their sleep during a poker brawl in 1904.

DOOMWATCH

...in 1972, Dr Spencer Quist presented the government of the day with a report alleging that, unless science and industry changed its ways, the next twenty years would see a hole in the ozone layer, several nuclear-power station mishaps, the depletion of the Amazon rain forest, the extinction of numerous animal species, a sexually-transmitted plague, war between Britain and Argentina, the cancellation of Crossroads, poll tax riots and the success of Viz comic. Quist was laughed out of Edward Heath's office, his Doomwatch team was disbanded and his TV programme curtailed. Currently, he specializes in "I told you so" articles for *New Scientist*.

SERGEANT BILKO

...in Vietnam, Sgt Ernie Bilko was detailed by the Pentagon to travel up the Mekong in search of Duane Doberman, who had freaked out on acid and was running a motor pool in Cambodia without any regard for human decency or the Geneva Convention. During the trip upriver, Bilko managed to get a Bing Crosby concert set up for the Vietcong and tried to pass off Dino Paparelli as the Old Groaner. Just as the VC were about to lower Colonel Hall into a pit full of snakes, who should happen to wander out of the jungle in search of a missing golf ball but the real Bing Crosby. Later, Bilko organized the InterService Annual Russian Roulette tournaments in Saigon, and, in the last days of the war, he made a tidy profit selling "Yankee Go Home" and "We Love You Ho Chi Minh" badges to the citizens of South Vietnam. But he really made his fortune when he raffled off his place on the last plane out of Saigon as the NVA were storming the city. "There were thousands of applicants, and imagine the look on their faces when I miraculously won the seat myself. I remember the high-spirited crowd of satisfied gamblers who showed up to wave me farewell and congratulate me on my fortune in games of chance. It's a good job I hadn't pawned my M-16."

DIRTY HARRY

...after throwing away his badge, Lieutenant Harry

Thomas Alva Edison Would be Proud John Clute

Like knitting needles coated in grease, the sentences stitch sleekly across the page, and we follow along at heel like nosing spaniels. The books we are reading do not contain a bad sentence. The print in which they are set is generously large, the paper thick, the pages turn, turn. Click we are reading *Gypsies* (1989, USA; Orbit, £6.99) by Robert Charles Wilson. Clack we have finished. Click we are reading *The Divide* (Foundation/Doubleday, \$19.95) by Robert Charles Wilson. Clack we have finished. Click.

Clack.

And another Wilson novel already awaits publication. Earlier, there were *A Hidden Place* (1986) and *Memory Wire* (1987). He writes fast, and smooth, and easy. He delivers the goods, as per the bill of lading. If there is no serendipity – no shock of unexpected recognition – in his work, neither is there a longueur; and it should be kept in mind that serendipity cannot easily be invoiced in advance, and that no writer who works to formula can afford injudicious flirtations with the viruses within the polish. If no dangerousness couches within the final pages of the two novels under review, neither are there any dropped stitches. If *Gypsies* can be thought of as a book which is not at all bad (though utterly safe), and if *The Divide* can be described as an exercise in airbrush pusillanimity, in neither case can we dare to claim to be saying anything Robert Charles Wilson doesn't already know. In this he rather resembles Robert Silverberg. Both men are professional to the final dregs of trope. In Silverberg's case professionalism could be described as a form of apostasy, while in Wilson's it might well be the grail to which he has long aspired; but the fact remains that – in 1990, at any rate – both writers produce work of a honed and tuneless mortmain clarity.

Click.

Clack, *Gypsies* is twofold. It is a conventional science-fantasy parallel-universe tale whose protagonists take most of the book to learn how to exploit properly their capacity to walk between the worlds, escaping in the nick of time the dystopian alternate America which is hunting them for their talent. And it is a family romance, a tale of lesions. Karen and Laura and Tim, orphan siblings from a bad world brought up in fear and trembling by tearful foster-parents in the dubious America of our current reality, have created for themselves in adulthood personality structures which husband the wounds they suffered in childhood. The notion that adult personalities are enfeoffed caretakers for the children in exile inside us lies at the heart of the family-romance mode, and Wilson does a

perfectly adequate job of mapping out the various imprints of indenture his siblings have chosen to go out by, out in the world. Karen escapes the burning discontinuity of exile – in this case of course the exile is literal, as they have all come as infants from another world – through a personality structure dominated by taboo, and will not admit the possibility of being able to Walk, or that her son may have inherited the dread gift. Laura on the other hand continues to Walk, but only part way back into paradise – she sets up home in a deboned and placid version of California, a sentimentalized nostalgic vanity-ridden adolescent's childhood paradise, where she can flirt with Haight-Ashbury till age gets her face for good. Tim becomes an addict, and the Gray Man, who has been hunting all three through the worlds, finds him an easy victim.

All this we learn through a neatly-stitched pattern of flashbacks; the novel proper begins long after. Karen's marriage has broken up in Toronto (a city whose spavined parasitical sprawl across the northern border or meniscus of the USA, through which it sucks for tit, clearly represents another kind of reversion to childhood) and escapes with her son Michael to California, where Laura, who is beginning to age, welcomes them into haven. It is not good enough. The Gray Man, who has haunted them from childhood, continues to press and tempt; and he wants to draw Michael into his own grim universe, the world of course from which the siblings originally came. He and his masters – their drab weatherbeaten version of America is called *Novus Ordo* – have long wanted to bring the siblings back, and have employed vaguely sorcerous means to blinker their lives in our own world, geasa intended to warp their personalities around a variety of disabling flaws, fear for Karen, vanity for Laura, anger for Tim. Adulthood for all of them has been, in other words, a curse and a trick. (Isn't it for all of us.) All Karen and Laura and Time – with the Slan-like help of the enormously talented young Michael – need to do is

unravel the curse of adulthood, and with one bound they can be free. Click.

Totally untouselled by the savage scepticism of its premise, *Gypsies* proceeds – clack – with crystalline clarity to an ending which no reader of genre fiction will fail to expect. Adulthood – we learn – is an imposition, a contraption of nuts and bolts and screws to pin us down. All we need to do – if we wish to Walk away from the torment of the rack – is to learn how to unscrew the thing. Family romance, in this reading, dissolves swimmingly into DIY escape manual. But of course *Gypsies* is not, in the tinkertoy come of its telling, a family romance at all. It is an American dream. It is an Edisonade. And it leaves not a wrack behind.

The Divide is something else altogether. There is a contrivance of family romance in the premise, as before, and a psychically disabled older brother whose betrayals motor the plot, as before, and an orthodox science-fiction topos to shape the premise for the market which is us, as before. It is a premise – the basic provenance runs from Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) through Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration* (1968) down to Charles Sheffield's *My Brother's Keeper* (1982) – that we all know – it is of course the induced-superman-within-the-skull premise, and we welcome it back. In this case the protagonist not only suffers from institutionalization (Disch), not only knows that his enhanced intelligence is beginning to fade (Keyes), but also manages to create for himself a secondary "normal" self with whom he shares his head (Sheffield). It is a regular premise-klatch. Hope rises in the breast of the spaniel.

Hope fades. The two personalities within the one skull begin the essential moral and positional discourse necessary if they are to come to a chivalrous conclusion about self-sharing, but are hardly allowed to get past a few glib preliminaries before the bad brother of the female in love with both of them begins to run amok, and kidnappings and chases and arson and stuff take

over centre stage, and *The Divide* sideslips into the most trivial horror/suspense clichés it is possible to imagine. There is actually a hostage in a burning warehouse in the heart of – once again – bathetic old Toronto. Unbelievably, the discourse between the two partials is solved – wait for it – by a sudden blow to the head, which knocks both of them into one unconscious broken egg. The new protagonist who awakens from the frying pan is duly scrambled, but with a modicum of growth potential (we are assured, as the novel closes in a tone of sweetums uplift). It is what one might call a leveraged sell-out.

It is hard – indeed it is impossible – to believe that a writer as visibly in control of his material as Robert Charles Wilson is could have destroyed *The Divide* unwittingly. No. He knew exactly how he has honouring his trust. The question is why. Is the American market now so governed by Dalton-Walden Disease (DWD) that his publishers refused to let him publish a book that might alarm the punters by probing too deep in prose too impeccable not to slice the quick, flense to the bone? If so, too bad for all of us. Has Wilson – more forgivably, perhaps – simply allowed his fertile quick clear sharp art to play mind games in the fields of topoi, just as an expert tourist might do the idols of Florence in a day, without a thought about the cost of knowingness? Will he soon come up with a book he has to live with? Will he soon come up with a book big enough to hold him – and us – to the job? If he does, look for blood and tears. Look for a new star, a new hook to rake the heart.

Some of the same strictures apply to Walter Jon Williams. The stories in *Facets* (TOR, \$18.95) spank the reader through the hoops of genre like bored cowpokes prodding meat, but by the end of the book there is an overwhelming sense that something's been processed to death, a sense that processed words turn out processed readers, spam in spam out. Even "Surfacing," a tale astonishingly full of allusive glimpses of a world far too complex to leave quickly, runs much too hurriedly through its elaborate routines, its cogently thought-out representations of the speech of whales transplanted to a new world, its strikingly unusual human protagonists, and ends in a sling-shot both adroit and humanly slipshod.

The devices and rhetoric of cyberpunk are everywhere evident in the book, the foreground of buzz, the romantic affinity with the loner who knows his/her job better than the corporate headjobs who do the hiring, as in "Video Star" and "Wolf Time." "The Bob Dylan Solution" is slow enough, perhaps, to bite deep. Set in an alternate

universe indistinguishable from this one to any reader insufficiently versed in the fatal cruces of the Civil War, "No Spot of Ground" unfruitfully makes Edgar Allan Poe a general for the South, follows him through what might (or might not) be a significantly altered battle, trails off into oily inanition; there are too many fine Civil War fantasies – from writers like Connie Willis and Marianne Wiggins – for this one to quite stand muster. "Dinosaurs" is an exercise in traditional science fiction, goes slow enough to work, deepens the parlance of the game it apes, works stunningly well. But the overwhelming sense of *Facets* is of overload, of what one might call story fatigue – a sense of tales which seem octaned to the eyeballs as they are read, but afterwards, as they settle into the storage maze of memory, seem strangely scant.

Two Notes: Alasdair Gray, who came as close to orthodox science fiction as he ever will in his first novel, does not attempt to replicate the knotted oomph of *Lanark* (1981) in *McGrotty and Ludmilla*; or, *The Harbinger Report* (Dog & Bone, £5.00), which far more resembles *The Fall of Kelvin Walker* (1985); but *McGrotty* does, in fact, depend, however scattily, upon a science-fiction premise. It is set in a slightly alternate England, round about now; a man named Harbinger has written a report which reveals the science-fictional secret at the heart of oligarchical successes in this depressed domain; but creepy young *McGrotty*, magically shoved through the corridors of power for his own reasons by a machiavellian civil servant of high rank, manages to straighten everything out to his own advantage, and to that of *Ludmilla*, his inamorata. The tale is told with that dry-ice recit deftness as deeply indigenous perhaps to Scottish writers as it is to French; it makes no bones; it has few graces; it cuts deep without a twitch. A handy fable.

In *The Ice-Shirt* (Deutsch, £14.95), which is the first volume of a series he proposes to call *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*, William T. Vollmann dives like a berserker plummet into the Matter of Vinland, surfaces with orts and congeries. We begin in Norway and Denmark in a chthonic bog where shapechanger kings charge down runnels out of Holdstock into historic time, and always with a strong sense that their descendents, like Erik the Red and his offspring and women who find Vinland, still rest uneasily within the straitjacket of the human cage. At times the language is beautiful. More often, individual sentences will shift from whiplash logorrhea to spineless gush and back again, more than once, before managing to settle for a period. There are maps and drawings and rune-like

plotches and diversions and gaps and bumptiousness and the occasional garish stupidity. Here is the full title, as presented on a separate page: *Seven Dreams About our Continent in the Days of the Sun Making Explicit Many *Revelations* Concerning Trees and Rivers, Ancestors, Eternities, Vikings, Crow-Fathers, Trespasses, Executions, Assassinations, Massacres, Whirlpool-Lives; Love-Souls and Monster-Souls, Dead Worlds Wherein we Made Fountains out of Prolehills; Voyages Across the Frozen Sea told Complete with Accounts of Various Treacherous Escapes, White Sweet Clover, Goldenrod & *The Fern Gang* as Gathered from Diverse Sources.* So it's carnival time at old Andre Deutsch.

Cluck.

Graphic Novels Stan Nicholls

Imagine Britain under an extreme right-wing government. A corrupt and unrestrained police force relegates human rights to a dim memory while the ruling elite vie to dip their snouts in the trough. An army of dispossessed sleep in cardboard boxes, and exploited teenagers sell their bodies on the streets, as ethnic minorities, gays and dissidents are ruthlessly persecuted. This is not a recap of last night's News at Ten, but the 1997 of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V For Vendetta* (Titan, £9.95).

However, this future wasn't really extrapolated from our present. As Moore explains in his introduction, he began to develop the idea in 1981, postulating a Labour victory in '82. A "limited" atomic war instigated by US President Kennedy shortly after brings nuclear winter to the UK and a subsequent fascist coup. But how this situation is arrived at doesn't matter – think of the story taking place on an alternate Earth if you like – the important thing is the strength of the narrative.

A young woman, Evey Hammond, is saved from rape and murder at the hands of the police by "V," dressed in a cloak and Guy Fawkes mask. We never discover the identity of this mysterious character, although we learn he was subjected to medical experimentation before escaping from Larkhill, a notorious government concentration camp.

V wages a one-man war against the State, outwitting the police by penetrating FATE, the government's all-pervasive surveillance computer. He blows up the Houses of Parliament and the "New Bailey," treats the populace to a firework display, and murders Establishment lackeys. Through a

combination of Anarchy, murder and macabre pranks, V eventually inspires an uprising. And all the while he works to shock Evey into the realization that she has the strength to fight back. (Bringing to mind Robert Neville's contention that living with a saint is more gruelling than being one.)

To say *V for Vendetta* is simply about a lone avenger battling an evil regime is like saying Adolf Hitler was an eccentric manufacturer of soap. A synopsis does not do it justice, makes it sound like standard superhero fare, and fails to convey its genuinely touching aspects and emotional impact. V, looming out of the night like the Phantom of the Opera and employing similar tactics to the protagonist of Eric Frank Russell's *Wasp*, is definitely not Spiderman.

The plot may be a little uncertain initially, but soon gains confidence, and the structure – V's exploits intercut with police procedural – is extremely well thought-out. Lloyd's art is as good as the script, with masterly figure work and an ability to imply rather than graphically depict violence, and is all the more effective for it.

Really good ideas tend to look strangely familiar, and it's possible to make a long list of influences on *V for Vendetta*, as Moore does in his foreword. But if you don't like it the chances are it's because you didn't think of it. After all, success is just a matter of luck – ask any failure.

Sandman (Titan, £7.95), a collection comprising issues eight to sixteen of the DC comic, illustrated by Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones III and others, further confirms Neil Gaiman's status, along with Alan Moore, as our most accomplished writer in the graphic field. His script adroitly combines myth, magical tradition, comic genre references and black humour to produce a unique and peculiarly disturbing narrative.

The Sandman, originally a 40's "Golden Age" creation, was resurrected several times as a conventional superhero before Gaiman arrived. Eschewing comic-book trappings, he returned to the basic concept of a character whose power lay in the manipulation of dreams.

The new series begins in 1916. Black occultist Roderick Burgess undertakes a ritual to conjure and enslave Death. Instead, he unwittingly summons the cadaverous figure of Morpheus (also known as Sandman), one of the "endless" – true immortal entities existing beyond the caprice of mere godhood.

Unwilling to deal with his captor – who demands magical power and endless life in exchange for freeing him – Sandman simply waits Burgess out, although his imprisonment causes disruption in the dream lives of the world's population. He escapes, in the

1980s, after Burgess dies and son Alex takes over. Sandman exacts revenge on the family before undertaking a quest for his three lost totems – a ruby dreamstone, helmet and pouch of sand.

The search for his magical artifacts complete, and the balance more or less restored, at this point the storyline, in the hands of a lesser talent, could have fallen into cliché and time-serving. (Until recently, industry pressure would probably have relegated a character like Sandman to "horror host" status anyway.) In fact the plot takes on more layers of complexity, and a remarkably effective air of unease, the deeper we get.

If horror and humour are separated by a thin dividing line, *Sandman* walks it with consummate ease; for confirmation witness the bathos and revulsion evident in the sequence dealing with a serial murderers' convention. There's some high-level emotional manipulation going on here, and I like it.

The Prisoner: Shattered Visage (Titan, £9.95), by Dean Motter and Mark Askwith, is a sequel to the cult TV series, reprinted from the DC magazine version.

In 1968 the Village was liberated by UN troops. But No 6 (the Patrick McGoochan character) remained, while No 2 (Leo McKern) was given a prison sentence in England. Released in the present day, the latter has written a book, *The Village Idiot* – albeit heavily censored by Intelligence – blowing the gaff on the Village.

Our unnamed heroine, disillusioned, quits MI5 – mirroring the actions of No 6 twenty years before. She embarks on a round-the-world yacht trip, but, her navigation equipment sabotaged by ex-husband and fellow agent Thomas, a hurricane shipwrecks her on the Village's beach. Meeting an aging, hirsute No 6 (now self-styled No 1), she tries to extract the secret which got him put away in the first place. Then No 2 arrives to confront the Prisoner, old enmities provoking a fight, before SAS types turn up to sort things out. The *denouement* reveals the Village's secret – an underground nuclear missile silo – which No 2 detonates after No 6 and the heroine escape.

The artwork is fine and the script serviceable (despite occasionally mannered dialogue), but I can't quite see the point of the exercise. Mystery was a major part of the show's appeal. I don't want everything explained ("filed, indexed, stamped, briefed or numbered") because spelling things out diminishes the sense of wonder (see the sequels to *2001* and *Orbitsville* as examples). This particularly applies when the "explanation," as here, is no real explanation at all. We do not learn

the reason for No 6's imprisonment; and that the Village houses a nuclear arsenal is hardly mind-boggling.

Another problem is that *The Prisoner* was very much a product of its time, and *Shattered Visage* looks hamstrung by its emulation of the original's then-fashionable obscurity. This is most telling in the lines No 6 is given ("No love without freedom. No freedom without love.") which ultimately tend to irritate rather than enlighten. But no doubt the fans will love it.

Hardly lovable, although considerably more audacious, is *Hard Core Horror No 1 – The Romance of Lord Horror and Jessie Matthews* (Savoy Books, £1.25), from a script by David Britton with art by Kris Guidio.

Britton's *Lord Horror* novel (1989) took place in a post-war alternate world where most European states have embraced varying degrees of fascism. Lord Horror – better known as British radio propagandist Lord Haw Haw (William Joyce) – was not hanged for treason in this universe.

The first issue of the spin-off comic is set earlier, in 1928, where Horror is enjoying success as a popular novelist (writing Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiches), and engaged in a passionate affair with the nation's sweetheart, Jessi Matthews. A vocal supporter of Oswald Mosley, he makes an enemy of ambitious despot Winston Churchill, who stages an unsuccessful assassination attempt against him.

A kind of verisimilitude is added by introducing James Joyce as Horror's brother; and T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Fred Astaire and Unity Mitford will all make appearances as the story progresses.

Like the book, the comic is not easy to give the flavour of, but might best be understood in terms of its influences. Michael Moorcock is certainly one – not surprisingly, given Britton's enthusiasm for his work, which is shared by Michael Butterworth (credited as editor here). There are also elements of Philip José Farmer's soft-porn fantasies *Image of the Beast*, *Blown* and *A Feast Unknown*. Add a dash of William Burroughs and underground comic artist S. Clay Wilson, dress the characters in cast-offs from *The Rocky Horror Show*, and you have an idea of the series' direction.

The comic does not have the impact of the novel, maybe because it hasn't got into its stride yet, but both are full of remarkable imagery, unconventional thinking and genuine cheek. Where they work, they have a compelling quality, despite the seemingly dubious moral stance.

I would like to believe that Britton is playing devil's advocate, employing allegory, shock tactics and absurdity in an honourable tradition of black satire. In any event it's probably only

a matter of time before a copy falls into the hands of some "moralist" group and we have an uproar.

Something else a bit different is the premier number of **Revolver** (July, £1.65), a monthly adult comic from Fleetway, publishers of market leader 2000 AD.

The seven continuing strips (perhaps one less would have given the others more room to breathe) cover a broad spectrum. Several show promise. Grant Morrison and Rian Hughes' *Dan Dare* portrays the Pilot of the Future as an amiable old buffer with a gammy leg pensioned-off in a semi-totalitarian future Britain. The first episode is a little skimpy, but one hopes it will get around to upsetting the purists. Veterans Paul Neary and Steve Parkhouse could be on to something very funny with *Happenstance and Kismet*; and I liked Milligan and McCarthy's *Rogan Gosh*, a send-up of Eastern mysticism featuring Rudyard Kipling and "Karmanaut" Gosh, presented in a migraine-inducing vividness that looks inspired by a cross between Hindu devotional art and *Oz* magazine. Charles Shaar Murray's strip biography of Jimi Hendrix, and other diverse efforts, wrap up an eclectic package.

This is a curious mix, intended for a 16-25 year-old audience, although I suspect they hope to pick up readers among superannuated hippies. The content is so varied I wonder who *Revolver* is supposed to appeal to, and how it will differ – humour apart – from Fleetway's other adult title, the consistently interesting *Crisis*. But it's early days yet, the potential is good, and the publisher deserves full marks for trying something out of the ordinary.

Three brief but honourable mentions. **Hellblazer** Vol 4 (Titan, £6.50), by Delano, Rayner, Buckingham and Hoffman, continues the supernatural adventures of John Constantine; crisply drawn black-and-white shockers with a depth, and social conscience, still rare in a field which has yet to entirely shake off the dead hand of axe-wielding bogeymen in fright wigs.

Breakthrough, edited by Pierre Christin and Andreas C. Knigge (Titan, £7.95), was inspired by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Twenty-seven leading comic creators use this historic event as the seed bed for contributions ranging from straightforward tales of life in the East, to surrealistic flights of fancy employing Cold War imagery, not all of them optimistic. Delivering a lower than average percentage of duffers for an anthology, some of the results are stunning.

Like *Breakthrough*, Al Davison's **The Spiral Cage** (Titan, £5.95) received

only a fraction of the critical attention it deserves. Davison, born with spina bifida, had twenty-one corrective operations before he was eight, and was universally written-off as a no-hoper. *The Spiral Cage*, his graphic novel autobiography, tells how he overcame prejudice – much of it taking the form of physical attacks – and began to build a career as an artist and writer of considerable promise.

Depicting the best and worst of human nature, and telling Al's story with a great deal of humour and not a shred of self-pity, *The Spiral Cage* just might be the best indication to date that the comics really are growing up.

News from the Butting Edge Paul Brazier

There is nothing so unforgivably dull as a dead metaphor – especially an inept one. In the first issue of **Journal Wired (JW)** Lucius Shepard expends a lot of effort in a search for the Cutting Edge. He doesn't find it, but neither does he ask, "the cutting edge of what?" or "what is it supposed to cut?" and so never realizes he is seeking intelligent life where none exists. Good metaphor generates vivid images, and powerful parallels. "The Cutting Edge" has me thinking of scalpels, razors, rip saws, bulldozer blades: but what this parallels escapes me – and Shepard too, it would appear. Baffled, he drifts off into unsatisfactory nostalgia for cyberpunks. It might be charitable to speculate, but perhaps he was supposed to find it in this radical new journal he is writing for.

Journal Wired can't decide whether it's a magazine or a book, so describes itself as "a quarterly." Furthermore, it makes the same mistake *Interzone* made eight years ago, and does not associate itself overtly with science fiction. Why not? Is it ashamed of sf? Perhaps it really does see itself as "the Cutting Edge," so transcending mere genre boundaries. Space precludes a complete review of issues #1 and #2 (\$7.95 and \$10), so let's look for this cutting edge in some samplings of their pages.

First the fiction: among many stories, there are two by authors I have nor previously liked. In #1 is a piece by Rudy Rucker called "Drugs and Live Sex – New York City, 1980." While perfectly written in terms of grammar and punctuation, its subject matter reminds me of second-rate Kilgore Trout. Can the man who gave us sublimities like *Spacetime Donuts* and *Software* (both of which I hated, but recognize as wonderful – my loss) really

believe he can convince anyone that an audience of zonked-out no-hopers would find a display of public fucking transcendent or mystical? Rationalized pornography has been around as long as men have had dicks, so no cutting edge here. In #2 there is a gem of a story from Lew Shiner. "Kidding Around" defies understanding. I will be re-reading it for its wonderful absurdity, and hoping its meaning will come clear to me sometime. There's no rush – but good though this story is, it cuts no edges with me.

In an opinion piece under the generic title "The Profit Motive," Andy Watson, co-editor/publisher of *JW*, says that telecomms and personal computers are the tools of an information revolution which is allowing independent producers to relegate the traditional book and record-publishing conglomerates to the role of distributors only. It's an interesting notion, but he will never usurp the big boys himself until his product is up to their standards. The typography lets *JW* down. There are brave attempts at originality on the first page of each item, and some are nice; but there are also glaring errors – the repetition of a line of text or of a dropped cap – and abominations like having each line of type smaller than the preceding, or one page which uses no less than eight different typefaces. I diagnose a bad case of desktop publishing. DTP allows anyone with a computer to play with typographic design. But play is all *Journal Wired* has managed here. This is not good design, so it cannot be cutting edge – nor will it ever match professional typographic design until its generators rely on human design abilities rather than the computer's do the real work.

There is an interview with Abbie Hoffman in #1 which I found incomprehensible – am I too English, too apolitical, or too sensible – and who is Abbie Hoffmann anyway? In #2 there is a new kind of interview: Colin Greenland and Lisa Tuttle interview each other, and what results is a fine "In Conversation" piece where they both get to exhibit their opinions as fiction writers and their perceptiveness as critics. Lisa emerges as the kind of intuitive writer I had always suspected from her work. Colin Greenland, however, reveals that he thinks his novels "are cuckoo clocks... [they go] all the way round, and then a little bird pops out." I will return to Colin in a moment, but for this priceless comment, I am very grateful to *Journal Wired*.

So, like any magazine, this one is good in parts. What is bad, however, can easily be overlooked in favour of what is excellent. Its great strength is the acid wit of Lucius Shepard, which alone is worth the cover price. In #2 he abandons the continuity apparently

intended with #1. I defy you not to be offended by his "Remedial Reading for the Generation of Swine." I was, even though I agree with everything in it. It attacks smug self-interest, has to resort to fiction finally to make its point, and it is startlingly, horribly apposite. Of course, it reads real ragged, but you don't convey raw emotion smoothly, with style, and I was moved. If "cutting edge" were at all an appropriate term, it would apply here. This is certainly new, and relevant. But it is actually no more cutting edge than Colin Greenland's new novel, *Take Back Plenty*.

Now I have known Colin for years, but I never knew he thought of himself as a craftsman rather than an artist as he reveals in the *JW* interview. I had been awaiting *Take Back Plenty* (Unwin, £6.99) with mixed feelings. I was impressed by his first book, a critical analysis of *New Worlds*; bewildered by the second, a fantasy novel; and while I enjoyed the third and fourth, both science-fiction/fantasy novels, I felt he was marking time, that there was unused potential there. Hence my apprehension. I needn't have worried. The craftsman has produced a masterpiece.

If you have ever wondered why you began reading science fiction, then this book answers that question. *Take Back Plenty* is fun. It is *The Magic Flute* of space opera, the way *Star Wars* ought to have been; it takes interesting liberties with narrative method; and it pays homage to Lewis Carroll in that it is wonderful nonsense. But there is a serious core, as there is with all true comedy, which makes the farce so much more than just candy floss.

Tabitha Jute, a woman space bargee and owner/operator of her own vessel, falls foul of the law and her own short temper, and is consequently threatened with confiscation of her ship. This slight and rather clichéd beginning nevertheless has a particular skewed flavour which constantly recurs in the beautifully nested plot. To quote Colin from his *JW* interview, she is: "a self-sufficient, somehow isolated woman who's doing her best to cope with the mad world she finds herself in. She's quite down to earth, a bit grumpy, a bit impatient, and she's surrounded by grotesques who are making impossible demands of her all the time."

More and more familiar sf tropes and stereotypes, up to and including the foiling of an alien invasion and the freeing of humanity from another alien oppression, appear – only to be lampooned. With a sure touch, the action moves from the superb control of your best over-achieving space opera hero to the wildest slapstick, with even a revolting inversion of a custard-pie fight to finish off. Finally, Tabitha finds that the universe is not under her control, that things just happen to her, but

that she can affect the flow, if not divert it. This is almost clearly stated in this complete paragraph from the book –

The glory of English is its irregularity, no less hectic and vigorous now than when it did for only a portion of a single globe. Its promiscuous structure bonds and multiplies magnificently at the animate level, but can convey no inkling of the inner properties of material space, the music of the spheres. You see, events are not the point. It is the organisation of events which signifies. There are certain capacities of the Tibetan tongue, however... (p. 357)

This book is every bit as glorious as the language it is written in. But I would never term it cutting edge.

If Lucius Shepard can't find the cutting edge either, perhaps it doesn't exist anymore. Science fiction, and genre fiction generally, is no longer marginalized: with its massive commercial success it has become firmly established in the centre. So it now has a different role. Shepard says that genre fictions and their fans have become too self interested: that may also be the case with the fiction. It is certainly symptomatic of success. I'm reminded of the pompous fat man in kids' cartoons, bending over, with a billy goat eyeing the seat of his pants. We would all love to kick him, to deflate his self importance, and the goat fulfils our wish. With their overt critical stances of fiction and community, *Take Back Plenty* and Lucius Shepard's article have lots of kick on our behalf, and in the right place. So perhaps we need a new term: perhaps we should call them "the butting edge."

Female Territory Gwyneth Jones

If the Women's Press sf list delivers despatches from the frontiers of the female mind, Onlywoman Press's sporadic outbursts of scientifiction must be coming from somewhere deep inside that inaccessible territory.

Nicky Edwards' *Stealing Time* (Onlywoman, £4.95) is the nearest to an easy read in this burst, a likable tale of an anti-state computer scam in that favourite Augmented Thatcherism setting. There's hope for everyone: even the baddies are given interior life and motion. The futuristic plot device is the same that ushered in the dystopia of Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*... "they turned all the money into plastic and then they took away our plastic..." Unlike Atwood, Nicky Edwards tells story, not fable, and makes some scrabbling attempts to show the immediate future at work, devoid of greasy cash. The book's failing, word

for word, is that there's far too much late-night chat in the kitchen: shall we go down the pub?; I hate my job; will she, won't she; am I ready for monogamy?... However correct it may be to reject boys'-own adventure trappings, the imagined world has to be *different* and deeply fascinating, for the common round to be all.

The lesbian feminist anthology *In and Out of Time*, edited by Patricia Dunker (Onlywoman, £5.95) includes much writing that is frankly amateur, and some that's skilled and effective, including a short piece ("Naomi" by Tina Kendall) on the nature of daring adventure which puts Dan Dare firmly in his place. None of the nominally speculative or fantasy inclusions are among the interesting stories, except for the poorly titled "Saccharin Cyanide," a chilling fable set in the futuristic/present of modern tv drama. This story is also the title feature in Anna Livia's own collection *Saccharin Cyanide* (Onlywoman, £4.95), the most impressive of the three books. Anna Livia's previous sf novel, *Bulldozer Rising*, did more interesting things with the same material as Nicky Edwards' *Stealing Time*. Her new collection is idiosyncratic: sketches and objets trouvés alongside conventional story. But the writing always has the edge and clarity: and the not-sf (pace Michael Swanwick et al) breaks sacred genre rules in interesting ways. If your taste extends to the speculative side of sf, then transcend gender/orientation for an hour or two. Buy this, try a mouthful. Anna Livia deserves attention.

(Gwyneth Jones)

The Plotting Machine Wendy Bradley

Of the three elements, plot, character and setting, common to all tales, character is the one which is most problematic for science-fiction and fantasy writers. In the feat of creating a workable reality, and setting up a story that shows how it works, the writer can find that the people who take part in its events become cyphers, chess pieces moved around to demonstrate the validity of the set of rules constructing the reality rather than vital people who partake in that reality.

This to my mind is the flaw throughout the work of Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. This pair of American writers (Tracy is a man, by the way) have now launched a seven-part saga, *The Death Gate Cycle*, with what is apparently their first hardback, *Dragon Wing* (Bantam, £11.95). The ful-

some blurb informs us that the first four books will explore different realms and that "in the final three novels, characters begin to discover the other worlds – places they can reach only by risking the Death Gate – leading to the supreme battle for control of the Gate and the future of all their worlds." This seems to argue a degree of pre-planning which is cold-blooded in the extreme and the characters in *Dragon Wing* themselves are moved in and out of our focus with one eye on the six long books to go.

The conceit in this saga is that a world has been "sundered" into four realms each dependent on one of the four alchemical elements of earth, air, fire and water. In the realm of air there are floating islands of "coralite" on which humans, elves and dwarves live at war, navigating their way between the islands on enchanted recalcitrant dragons or in mechanical magical dragonboats. The plot has enough loose ends to weave you into a commitment to reading the next episode, but the main character, the only one with any semblance of depth, whose ship is named "Dragon Wing" in honour of the elven term for "any risk-taking adventure worth the price," dies in the last chapter. Or at least I think he does. He has already been resurrected once in the course of the volume. Even death must give way to the exigencies of the Weis and Hickman plotting machine.

Weis and Hickman's *Rose of the Prophet* saga meanwhile winds its way onwards with volume two, *The Paladin of the Night* (Bantam, £3.99). Again, this is easy enough to read, unless you omitted to read part one (there is not even the most cursory "story so far..."), but again a one-line description of each of the main characters will give you the entire novel – fiery Arab wench Zhora both loves and hates the husband her god made her marry. Khardan, the godfearing husband, is tall dark and handsome, also fiery, also loves/hates her. Matthew is a virginal eighteen-year-old innocent whose guardian angel (complete with wings) has kept him alive in an alien land by having him mistaken first for a girl then a madman. Who finds a strange ability to do unsuspected magic? Who gets to flex his pecs in the torture chamber? Who gets almost but not quite ravished?

The war between the gods and their immortals is a pretty enough conceit that gets guardian angels mixing it up with djinn and indeed Death herself but the people are chesspieces and once the plot is wound up and set going any fool could write the next scene. The plot hinges on the evil Knights trying to resurrect their god, who happens to be imprisoned in the fish which, for reasons too tedious to enumerate, Matthew carries sealed in a glass bowl.

They also try to recruit Khardan but since their recruiting process involves torturing the recruit until he denies his god and accepts theirs, and since Khardan worships the wandering god Akran and they want him to worship soundalike Zakrin you can probably guess what happens.

"What did he say?" Ibn Jhad demanded of the tormentor.

"He said... 'Zakrin, I give you my life.'"

"Are you certain?" Ibn Jhad frowned. He had heard the words "give you my life," but the name of the God to whom the man prayed had been indistinct.

"Of course!" the Lifemaster said hastily.

Suckers!

Barbara Hambly's *Dark Hand of Magic* (Unwin, £3.50) has more life in its shortest paragraph than Weis and Hickman can breathe into a seven-volume epic. It is part of a series too but skilfully self-contained, giving enough pre-plot to give the characters a history without spoiling the pace for old hands. Sun Wolf is an under-trained mage and semi-retired warrior, and he and his lady and lieutenant Star Hawk buckle a good swash against all kinds of enemies, magical and prosaic. The setting has a 17th-century feel to it; as if there had been no Atlantic and American Indian warriors had hired out as mercenaries to petty European princedoms. People get sick or bad tempered, fall in love, play politics, make jokes, behave like real people rather than cyphers in fact. Loved it; mental note to go out and catch up on the rest of the series.

Any review of Terry Brooks' *The Sci-ons of Shannara* (Orbit, £12.95) is, surely, superfluous since anyone who has invested enough time and energy to get this far in a saga is going to want to complete the next episode, but new readers like myself can plunge in here and find sufficient background exposition scattered around to make this comprehensible and enjoyable – although not enough to make me rush out and buy the rest. Three descendants of the previous heroes are called to complete some fairly stiff-sounding quests to restore magic to the world and there are, indeed, some problems with the pace of the book as Brooks juggles the multiple focus of three sets of major characters, the female character amongst them being virtually lost to sight.

The Disposable Character Problem looms large in this one – just as you know the new character in a *Star Trek* episode is doomed if the plot requires Kirk to feel guilty about something, so here there is a character, Coll, who is without the inherited gift of magic and yet is the beloved brother of the key character, Par, who has the gift. Throughout the novel I was waiting for Coll to get his – would it be necessary

for Par's growth for Coll to die, or would Coll have to join the Shadowen, the demonic creatures infesting the land, so that Par would have to feel guilty about having to kill him? I'm not going to tell you what *does* happen to him because there would be no point in reading the novel if you knew – and that's the flaw. It is signalled so strongly throughout that Something is going to happen to Coll that I finally gave in and read the last three pages to find out. And there's a sequel on the way. Life's too short for so many sagas, even if this one is better than most.

(Wendy Bradley)

Old Russian Magic

CJ. Cherryh is something of a phenomenon. As well as carving out a name for herself as one of the major writers of sf (and reasonably hard sf at that), she has also, right from the beginning of her career (*Gate of Ivrel*, 1976), been writing fantasy that ranks with the best in that genre. Of late she has been alternating between the two fields, and now she offers us *Rusalka* (Methuen, £14.99), a long fantasy novel set in a pre-Christian Russia, where magic is something very real indeed.

The story is told from the viewpoints of two main characters: Pyetr Kochevnikov, a reckless, somewhat arrogant young man; and Sasha Misurov, a friendless boy who has already discovered in himself a dangerous potential for magic. The story kick-starts almost from the first page when these two make an unlikely alliance – Sasha comes to the aid of the badly wounded Pyetr and the fleeing pair encounter an old but powerful wizard, Uulamets, in a dead forest. These three are threatened by the spirits of old Russia – by river-things and yard-things and house-things and forest-things and, most of all, by the dread rusalka of the title, the ghost of Uulamets' dead daughter. Uulamets is determined to have her back amongst the living, at whatever cost. She is in love with Pyetr – and he with her. And Sasha, knowing the rusalka can only cling to its life-in-death by sucking the life from everything around it, tries to protect his friend and at the same time control his own lethal talent. Meanwhile, there are other forces at work and the story moves, with all Cherryh's impressive fast-forward pace, to a dramatic final confrontation.

The old wizard and two young heroes are altogether more than the established stereotypes we've been bludgeoned into expecting by so many fantasy trilogies. This dark ancient Russia, too, is more than just the usual stage-set and although there are no

lengthy sections of exposition here we come to know it through the thoughts and senses of the two protagonists; and we find out what a force such as magic would really mean in a world like this. The disbelieving Pyetr is forced to recognize its reality; and Sasha, who sees his own magical potential as a curse, must nevertheless come to terms with it. We feel magic's power and unpredictability – and also the price it can exact from those who make use of it.

This is a long book – 470 pages – and, although the story-skeleton is something that other writers could well have packed into a short-story, or at least a much shorter novel, there's no feeling of padding here. What drives the narrative is the characters and the continual choices they are forced to make, disadvantaged as they are by knowing too little about their own situation and also by the contradictory pulls of friendship, love, mistrust and fear.

Good as it is, *Rusalka* is not without flaws. One character that Cherryh fails to bring to life on the page (perhaps not surprisingly, since it's the ghost) is Eveshka, the wizard's daughter. Which is a problem, since it's hard to accept the strength of Pyetr's new-found love for her. Also there are a few too many moments in the story when you have to flick back a couple of pages to piece together just exactly what has happened.

Nevertheless, *Rusalka* is far superior to the standard retreat quest-fantasy and, if you know Cherryh's other work, both fantasy and sf, you'll find it imbued with her characteristic virtues, including an impressive sense of tension and urgency. So much so, that, as with many Cherryh books, you're liable to find *Rusalka* an exhausting as well as enjoyable read.

(Neil Jones)

Love, Death and Betrayal

Considering how rare it is for a writer to have a short-story collection published without having had a single novel on the bookshelves, the arrival of *The Time-Lapsed Man and Other Stories* (Pan, £3.99), would normally come as something of a surprise. But these are stories by *Interzone* discovery Eric Brown, and those familiar with Brown's work may find it no surprise at all. Brown has moved into the front-rank of British science fiction in the last few years on the strength of a handful of short stories published in *IZ*, all of which are collected in this volume – in fact, only three of the eight stories here, "Pithecanthropus Blues," "The Karma Kid Transcends," and

"The Inheritors," will be new to regular readers of the magazine.

All but one of the stories take place in the same universe as the title piece: a future of telepaths and androids, where spacers mind-push their starships through the nada continuum and where human experience – and the human body itself – have become the raw material for sado-masochistic art forms. Brown's characters live fast and sometimes die young in stories that create a cogent and convincing world through which the author explores enduring obsessions with sex and death, love and betrayal. In other hands, such material could quickly become stifling, but Brown's strength lies not only in the conviction of his writing, but in his understanding of the values of solid plotting and his strong sense of narrative drive.

Values not fully realized in his first professional sale, "Krash-Bangg Joe and the Pineal Zen Equation" (*IZ* 21), in which the telepath protagonist deals out death and betrayal to save her lover, the Krash-Bangg Joe of the title. This story headed the *IZ* poll for its year, but although it well-deserved to see print it is nevertheless flawed. First, as the flamboyant title itself might suggest, too much is crammed into the story; and, for the sake of a gripping opening, Brown has chosen to put far too much of the action into flashbacks. The overall effect is disorientating enough to obscure a distinct plot-creak near the climax – when the protagonist's fiendishly complex plan is allowed to depend, unnecessarily and implausibly, on the integrity and benevolence of a telepath from a rival agency. Still, the story's strengths – a dense, well-realized background, characters you are interested in and care about, Brown's impressive prose style, and his baroque treatment of familiar sf ideas and imagery – carry it through. Despite its faults, it's still an impressive start to a professional career.

However, it's interesting to compare this story with "The Karma Kid Transcends" (first published in *Opus* – ironically, a story which *IZ* rejected, in our view surprisingly). Although "Kid" has a slower start than "Krash-Bangg Joe," its similar ingredients are worked in a more linear fashion, the narrative is thus kept in better focus and it pulls smoothly all the way through. Again, love is the force which drives the telepath-narrator, this time to explore the dimly-sensed territory that lies beyond death.

The title story of the collection, "The Time-Lapsed Man" (*IZ* 24), is perhaps Brown's best-known work and also topped the magazine's poll for its year. It shows us a doomed mind-flux spacer whose senses fail, one after the other, isolating him from the universe that he had already cut himself off from emo-

tionally long before. And "The Girl Who Died For Art and Lived" (*IZ* 22) is another doomed character, a holomaterialist who wishes to turn her own death into a work of art. In both these stories, there is only ever one likely conclusion, but, in the essence of all tragedy, the art of the story lies in the path of its unfolding.

Despair is not universal. "Star-Crytals and Karmel" (*IZ* 31), set unusually on relatively tranquil colony-world, is nevertheless full of disturbing events – and yet concludes if not in triumph then at least in hope, transcending the disillusionment of what has gone before.

By contrast, "Big Trouble Upstairs" (*IZ* 26), a dazzling ride through a Disneyworld gone amok, is downright optimistic. Here, the female narrator is finally able to resolve and reconcile her material problems and spiritual needs, ultimately finding not just physical fulfilment, but love – the holy grail which so many of Brown's characters pursue. "Big Trouble Upstairs" is fast, gripping, and very readable – arguably still Brown's best story to date.

Of the two all-new stories, one is firmly rooted in Brown's created universe, and one stands clearly outside of it. "Pithecanthropus Blues" is relatively minor Brown, with an implausible idea at its heart – of a spacer who finds himself switching identities with one of his proto-human ancestors. The overall tone of the story is lighter than most in the volume, although the familiar seam of Brownian fatalism runs through it, and if you can accept the implausible story premise, you'll probably enjoy Brown's handling of it. "The Inheritors of the Earth," the last and longest story in the book, also links with the past, that of the Neanderthals and also the more recent past of Victorian England. Here Brown changes style and successfully captures the rhythms of 19th-century prose; but although the story entertains and engages, it lacks fire. It stands apart from the rest not only stylistically but also because it is not part of the nada-space sequence and this undoubtedly disturbs the symmetry of this collection.

Brown has been called a cyberpunk, usually by those who appear to want to dismiss or diminish his work. However, although he appears, understandably, to have absorbed cyberpunk techniques and imagery, as well as elements from elsewhere in sf, his themes are his own. Clearly he's writing what he wants to write and that is science fiction. He gives the impression of someone who is comfortable with the label, and who therefore does not feel the need, as many British sf writers appear to do, to have to justify or apologize for it.

Like all promising new writers,

Brown will eventually need to expand his horizons beyond the territory presented here. If *The Time-Lapsed Man* raises a question, it's probably "what next?" Whatever the answer, on the evidence here, it's likely to be worth watching out for. In the meantime, this is a collection of stories that, while not flawless, has an energy and an accomplishment that makes it well worth anyone's attention. Those who like their sf strong, clear and uncompromising should rush out and buy it. Now.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

Total Crap

A common psychological experience is the sudden conviction that the whole world is a complex stage set, created by some unknown agency. You yourself are at its heart, while around you the illusions that "They" have provided seek to beguile or persecute you, but always to deny you the truth.

Philip K. Dick specialized in variations on this theme, and now Piers Anthony has taken it up in **Total Recall** (Legend, £12.99), a novel based on one of Dick's short stories. The combination is unhappy. Requiring juvenile action/adventure, Anthony also requires there to be a "rational" explanation for the odd things that happen to Douglas Quaid as he strives to recover his stolen identity, and that Quaid should "solve" the problem. This in turn requires idiot plotting on a grand scale. Much of the book is taken up with a prolonged chase/mayhem sequence, which may work better for Arnold Schwarzenegger in the accompanying film than it does in cold print. Even so, it must be pushing it a bit for a broken machine to speak a single line before expiring on not one but three occasions – Nick Lowe, please note.

The scientific content, as well as being explained in a heavy-handed fashion, is on a similar level. "Modern science was wonderful, but for a moment he wished they hadn't invented a way to set aside the limitation of lightspeed, making virtually instant communication between the planets possible." So much for Special Relativity. The principal business of the colony on Mars, incidentally, is the mining of an otherwise unavailable strategic metal called turbinium. So much for the Periodic Table.

Cliché piles upon cliché. Now, and doubtless in the future, rich people may own helicopters, autogyros or executive jets. They don't here; they have aircars, just as in 1955. Even the women have old-fashioned figures – long-legged, big-bosomed, and never a bra in sight. There is only the faintest hint of a political and economic frame-

work – it consists mainly of a war between "Northbloc" and "Southbloc" (boundaries courtesy the Brandt Report, I presume) but no mention of the ideological/economic areas of conflict, let alone the rights and wrongs.

This is badness of chemical purity. The emotional range covers macho power fantasy, glutinous sentimentality and nothing in between; the characters are cut-outs of good and evil, without an inner life between them; the dialogue is impoverished to the point that no one can think of a more original insult than "Fuckin' asshole." To emphasize the excitement, Anthony is liberal with his exclamation points. As the crowning idiocy, we meet a bunch of intelligent aliens who have been altruistically guiding the faltering steps of infant mankind, in the hope that Earth may take an honourable place in the comity of civilized worlds. On the present showing, they're making a dog's breakfast of the assignment.

Science fiction is allegedly the literature of ideas. I cannot recall when I last encountered a book so empty of literary qualities or intellectual stimulation as this one, and I refuse to believe that Anthony is any less aware of its defects than I am. Without his name on the cover and the backup of the film, it could never have emerged from the humblest publisher's slushpile. (Betka Wight)

UK Books Received June 1990

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Adams, Richard. **Traveller**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-011934-5, 366pp, paperback, 3.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first published in Canada [?], 1988; it's about General Robert E. Lee's horse; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 29.) 5th July.

Anthony, Piers. **Out of Phase**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-52471-X, 288pp, paperback, 3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; part of the interminable "Apprentice Adept" series.) 5th July.

Anthony, Piers. **Total Recall**. "Now a major motion picture from Columbia/Tristar." Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3777-X, 224pp, hardcover, 12.99. (Sf novelization, first published in the USA, 1989; inspired by a screenplay by Dan O'Bannon and others; as every sf fan should know, it's based on Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for You Wholesale" [1966].) 12th July.

Anthony, Piers. **Total Recall**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-974200-4, 224pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf novelization; a near-simultaneous mass-market edition of the preceding item.) 2nd August.

Ashpole, Edward. **The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence**. Foreword by Robert S. Dixon. Cassell/Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2210-X, 170pp, trade paperback, 6.95. (Illustrated non-fiction account of SETI research, first published in 1989.) July?

Asprin, Robert Lynn, and Lynn Abbey, eds. **Thieves' World, Book 10: Aftermath**. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-279-3, 273pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1987; contains original stories by John Brunner, Janet Morris, etc.) Late entry: May publication, received in June.

Asprin, Robert Lynn, and Lynn Abbey, eds. **Thieves' World, Book 9: Blood Ties**. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-180-0, 238pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1986; contains original stories by C. J. Cherryh, Diane Duane, etc.) Late entry: March publication, received in June.

Baliol, Alexander. **The Magefire: First Book of the Amulets of Darkness Cycle**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0241-9, 436pp, hardcover, 14.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; its a first novel by a new British writer.) 13th September.

Banks, Iain M. **Use of Weapons**. MacDonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-191605, 379pp, hardcover, 12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; "explores once again the universe of the Culture, which he has previously visited in *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*.") 13th September.

Barker, Clive. **Clive Barker's Nightbreed: The Making of the Film**. Introduction by Mark Salisbury and John Gilbert. Collins/Fontana, ISBN 0-00-638136-7, 239pp, trade paperback, 9.99. (Heavily illustrated screenplay by Barker, with a foreword by the author; it's based on his horror novel *Cabal*.) 16th August.

Burns, Christopher. **About the Body**. Hodder/Sceptre, ISBN 0-340-52564-9, 193pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf/fantasy/mainstream collection, first published in 1988; four of the 14 stories originally appeared in *Interzone*; recommended.) 5th July.

Carroll, Jonathan. **A Child Across the Sky**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-970950-3, 268pp, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1989; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 32, and that review is quoted on the paperback cover: "the shivering razor-edge of the fantastic...Carroll in his prime.") 19th July.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Tales from Planet Earth**. Preface by Isaac Asimov. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-969080-2, 313pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; it's a "Byron Preiss Visual Publication," illustrated [rather poorly] by Michael Whelan.) 19th July.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Tales of Ten Worlds**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04713-5, 245pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1962; it contains at least four overlaps with the collection listed above – naughty of Gollancz to reissue their old volume a month before the paperback debut of the Arrow/Legend one.) 21st June.

Clowes, Carolyn. **The Pandora Principle**. "Star Trek 34." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-283-1, 273pp, paperback, 2.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; in America, this was released as #49 in the series; apparently the numbering of all these Titan "Star Trek" novels differs from that of the original editions.) Late entry: April publication, received in June.

Collins, Max Allan, and Dick Locher, eds. **The Dick Tracy Casebook: Favorite Adventures**, 1931-1990. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-

014568-0, 273pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Comic-strip collection, first published in the USA, 1990; it contains a considerable amount or original work by Chester Gould, the creator of detective Dick Tracy, and of course it has been timed to coincide with the Warren Beatty film.) 5th July.

Devereux, Paul, and others. **Earth Lights Revelation – UFOs and Mystery Lightform Phenomena: The Earth's Secret Energy Source.** Cassell/Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2209-6, 239pp, trade paperback, 7.95. (Illustrated non-fiction account of "curious light phenomena," often mistaken for UFOs; first published in 1989.) July.

Dickinson, Peter. **Skeleton-in-Waiting.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-973650-0, 154pp, paperback, 3.50. (Alternative-world mystery novel; first published in 1989; a sequel to *King and Joker* [1976], set in the same imaginary timeline where King Victor II rules contemporary Britain.) 2nd August.

Dickinson, Peter. **Walking Dead.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-960310-1, 252pp, paperback, 3.99. (Mystery novel with apparent elements of supernatural horror; first published in 1977.) 2nd August.

Dixon, Chris. **Winter in Aphelion: The Adventures of Skarry the Dreamer.** Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440611-8, 220pp, paperback, 3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) 28th June.

Duane, Diane. **Doctor's Orders.** "Star Trek 36." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-285-8, 291pp, paperback, 2.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 19--?) 21st June.

Farris, John. **Shatter.** Gollancz/VG Horror, ISBN 0-575-04781-X, 317pp, paperback, 3.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1981.) 21st June.

Finney, Jack. **Time and Again.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-959010-7, 399pp, trade paperback, 7.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1970; it's regarded by many as the classic timeslip romance, and this is the first British edition for nigh on 20 years; unfortunately the period photographs which serve as illustrations are rather murky.) 2nd August.

Fowler, Christopher. **The Bureau of Lost Souls.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-968340-7, 244pp, paperback, 3.99. (Horror collection, first published in 1989.) 19th July.

Fowler, Christopher. **Rune.** Century, ISBN 0-7126-3902-0, 368pp, trade paperback, 7.50. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 12th July.

Gentle, Mary. **Rats and Gargoyles.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-01948-2, 414pp, hardcover, 12.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's set in a city where rats rule, "somewhere in a Baroque time of the heart, in a past and future Renaissance.") 19th July.

Greeley, Andrew M. **Angel Fire.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-967840-3, 304pp, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 2nd August.

Grey, Michael. **The Room.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13559-3, 239pp, paperback, 2.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; it's described as a debut book by a British-born writer resident in Canada.) 20th July.

Halam, Ann. **The Skybreaker.** Orchard Books, ISBN 1-85213-183-7, 208pp, hardcover, 8.95. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; sequel to *The Daymaker* and *Transformations*; "Ann Halam" is a pseudonym for Gwyneth Jones.) 28th June.

Harrison, Harry, and Robert Shekley. **Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Bottled Brains.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04757-7,

236pp, hardcover, 12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?] 1990; the third "Bill" novel; it's copyright "Byron Preiss Visual Publications" [groan], but at least this edition contains no illustrations.) 5th July.

Hill, Douglas. **The Colloghi Conspiracy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04579-5, 238pp, hardcover, 12.95. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; sequel to *The Fraxilly Fracas*; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 21st June.

Hill, Douglas. **The Fraxilly Fracas.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04780-1, 220pp, paperback, 3.50. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1989; reviewed by Stan Nicholls in *Interzone* 32.) 21st June.

Jordan, Robert. **The Eye of the World.** "Book One of The Wheel of Time." Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-19068-4, 670pp, hardcover, 13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; previously best known for his Conan novels, "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym for James Rigney, Jr.) 12th July.

Kelly, James Patrick. **Look Into the Sun.** Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0354-9, 280pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; sequel to *Planet of Whispers*.) 5th July.

Kelman, Judith. **While Angels Sleep.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20782-1, 280pp, paperback, 3.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 14th June.

Kirstein, Rosemary. **The Steerswoman.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-31348-7, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; a debut novel.) 13th July.

Kurtz, Katherine. **High Deryni: Volume III in The Chronicles of Deryni.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-961930-X, 369pp, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1973.) 2nd August.

Laws, Stephen. **The Frighteners.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-62944-1, 375pp, hardcover, 14.95. (Horror novel, first edition.) June?

Laymon, Richard. **Resurrection Dreams.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3534-1, 352pp, paperback, 3.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1988 [the date 1986 is mentioned inside, but we believe this to be wrong].) 21st June.

Lindholm, Megan. **Wolf's Brother.** Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440617-7, 236pp, paperback, 3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; sequel to *The Reindeer People*.) 28th June.

Lorrah, Jean. **Metamorphosis.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation. The First Giant Novel." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-288-2, 371pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) Late entry: March publication, received in June.

Marshak, Sondra, and Myrna Culbreath. **The Prometheus Design.** "Star Trek 35." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-284-1, 190pp, paperback, 2.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1982.) Late entry: May publication, received in June.

Martin, George R. R., and Melinda M. Snodgrass, eds. **Wild Cards, Volume Six: Ace in the Hole.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-278-5, 385pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-world sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1989; contains original stories by Victor Milan, Walter Jon Williams, etc.) Late entry: April publication, received in June.

Martin, George R. R., ed. **Wild Cards, Volume Five: Down & Dirty.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-275-0, 518pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-world sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1988; contains original stories by Edward Bryant, Pat Cadigan, Roger

Zelazny, etc.) Late entry: March publication, received in June.

Moore, Alan, and David Lloyd. **V for Vendetta.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-291-2, 286pp, trade paperback, 9.95. (Graphic novel, first edition; contains material reprinted from *Warrior* comic, 1982-83, and DC Comics, 1988-89.) 28th June.

Morris, M. E. **The Icemen.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20798-8, 384pp, paperback, 3.99. (Marginal sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; it seems to be a thriller about aged Nazis holed up in Antarctica.) 14th June.

Morrison, Grant, and Steve Yeowell. **Zenith: War in Heaven, Part One.** "Zenith Book Four." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-262-9, unpaginated, trade paperback, 5.95. (Graphic novel, first edition; material reprinted from 2000 AD comic, featuring [in a bit part] Archie the Robot from Fleetway's old *Lion* comic.) 14th June.

Newman, Kim. **Bad Dreams.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71721-9, 280pp, hardcover, 13.95. (Horror novel, first edition; it's described as a combination of Clive Barker and Freddy Krueger.) 24th September.

Nixon, Joan Lowery. **The Dark & Deadly Pool.** Hodder/Lightning, ISBN 0-340-50591-5, 179pp, paperback, 2.99. (Juvenile horror thriller, first published in the USA, 1987.) 19th July.

Pavic, Milorad. **Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel in 100,000 Words.** 2 vols. ("male edition" and "female edition"). Translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Christina Pribicevic-Zoric. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-011469-6 and 0-14-011812-8, 338pp each, paperback, 4.99 each. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988 [it's not indicated whether a Yugoslavian edition preceded the American one]; a literary jape, partly cast in the form of a dictionary, it's described as "packed with action, often very violent"; apart from the mirror-image cover designs, the two versions are said to differ by just one paragraph – which seems an excellent wheeze for selling twice as many copies to the novel's admirers.) 28th June.

Pike, Christopher. **Weekend.** Hodder/Lightning, ISBN 0-340-52927-X, 190pp, paperback, 2.99. (Juvenile horror thriller, first published in the USA, 1986.) 21st June.

Reed, Robert. **Black Milk.** Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-19081-1, 327pp, trade paperback, 6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) June?

Ryman, Geoff. **The Child Garden, or A Low Comedy.** Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440684-3, 388pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1989; winner of the 1990 Arthur C. Clarke Award as best sf novel published in Britain during the preceding year.) 20th July.

Scott, Melissa. **The Kindly Ones.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04361-X, 373pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 21st June.

Sharee, Keith. **Gulliver's Fugitives.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation 11." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-286-6, 282pp, paperback, 2.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 198--?) Late entry: May publication, received in June.

Silke, James. **Frank Frazetta's Death Dealer: Lords of Destruction.** "Book 2." Grafton, ISBN 0-586-07018-4, 319pp, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; Frazetta's name precedes Silke's on the cover, but in fact this is a story by the latter based on artwork and a "concept" by the former.) 14th June.

Simak, Clifford D. **Ring Around the Sun**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0353-0, 205pp, paperback, 3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1953; it's nice to see this old favourite back in print; the text has been slightly updated – e.g. a reference to "the last thirty years" of Cold War has been altered to "the last forty years," which doesn't actually make sense, as the story is supposed to be set in 1977 [25 years from the time of writing] and that date is still mentioned in the text.) 5th July.

Simmons, Dan. **Phases of Gravity**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0257-5, 282pp, hardcover, 14.95. (Non-sf novel about an astronaut, first published in the USA, 1989; proof copy received.) 6th December.

Smith, Guy N. **Carnivore**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-961090-6, 202pp, paperback, 3.50. (Horror novel, first edition.) 2nd August.

Snyder, Midori. **Sadar's Keep: Book Two of The Queen's Quarter**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440531-6, 362pp, paperback, 3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 26th July.

Stableford, Brian. **The Werewolves of London**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71711-1, 390pp, hardcover, 14.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the opening volume of a trilogy; although it appears to be a mock-19th century tale of terror, it's actually more of a metaphysical scientific romance.) 17th July.

Steed, Neville. **Hallowes' Hell**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0240-0, 276pp, hardcover, 12.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author has a reputation as a crime/mystery novelist.) 11th October.

Swithin, Antony. **Princes of Sandastre: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book One**. Collins/Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617938-X, 220pp, trade paperback, 5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; apparently the debut book of another new British-born writer who resides in Canada.) 28th June.

Tepper, Sheri S. **The Marianne Trilogy**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13192-X, 525pp, paperback, 4.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition; contains the novels *Marianne, the Magus, and the Manticore* [1985], *Marianne, the Madame, and the Momentary Gods* [1988] and *Marianne, the Matchbox, and the Malachite Mouse* [1989], all first published in the USA.) 20th July.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Return of the Shadow: The History of The Lord of the Rings, Part One**. "The History of Middle-Earth, Volume 6." Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440669-X, 497pp, paperback, 5.50. (Heavily annotated fragments from early drafts of Tolkien's fantasy masterpiece, first published in 1988.) 28th June.

Wagner, John, and Alan Grant. **Judge Dredd's Mega-City Vice, Book Two**. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-229-7, unpaginated, trade paperback, 5.50. (Graphic novel, containing paper reprinted from 2000 AD comic; first edition.) 14th June.

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **The Wizard and the War Machine**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20750-3, 285pp, paperback, 3.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; sequel to *The Cyborg and the Sorcerers*.) 14th June.

Weiss, Daniel Evan. **Unnatural Selection**. Transworld/Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99360-3, 240pp, paperback, 4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel about New York life, told from the point of view of a cockroach; first edition; according to the blurb, "it has been considered too controversial to be published in the author's own country.") 2nd July.

Winter, Douglas E. **Faces of Fear: Encounters with the Creators of Modern Horror**.

Revised edition. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31246-4, 334pp, paperback, 3.99. (Interview collection; the original edition was first published in the USA, 1985; contains profiles of horror writers ranging from Virginia Andrews to Peter Straub, and taking in all the usual Big Boys along the way.) 13th July.

Womack, Jack. **Heathern**. Unwin Hyman, ISBN 0-04-440691-6, 255pp, hardcover, 12.95. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) 23rd August.

Wynne-Jones, Diana. **Fire and Hemlock**. Mandarin/Teens, ISBN 0-7497-0283-4, 341pp, paperback, 2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) 19th July.

Wynne-Jones, Diana, ed. **Hidden Turnings**. "Stories Through Time and Space." Mandarin/Teens, ISBN 0-7497-0279-6, 183pp, paperback, 2.99. (Juvenile fantasy anthology, first published in 1989; contains original stories by Douglas Hill, Tanith Lee, Terry Pratchett, etc.) 19th July.

Wynne-Jones, Diana. **The Homeward Bounders**. Mandarin/Teens, ISBN 0-7497-0281-8, 224pp, paperback, 2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1981.) 19th July.

Yep, Laurence. **Shadow Lord**. "Star Trek Giant." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-287-4, 280pp, paperback, 3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; these unnumbered "Giant" Star Trek novels seem to differ from the main series only insofar as they cost 1 more.) Late entry: April publication, received in June.

Overseas Books Received

Anderson, Poul. **The Shield of Time**. "A Novel of the Time Patrol." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85088-3, 359pp, hardcover, 18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; belated sequel to *Guardians of Time*, etc.) August.

Bingley, Margaret. **Seeds of Evil**. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-618-X, 245pp, paperback, 3.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1988.) 15th July.

Brown, Dale. **Day of the Cheetah**. Berkley, ISBN 0-425-12043-0, 502pp, paperback, \$5.50. (Near-future high-tech thriller, first published in the USA, 1989; it's supposedly set in 1996, but full of the usual weary old Cold War claptrap – when will American popular fiction get up to date?) 1st June.

Dalby, Richard, ed. **Victorian Ghost Stories by Eminent Women Writers**. Introduction by Jennifer Uglow. Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-593-0, 347pp, trade paperback, \$9.95. (Ghost story collection, first published in the UK as *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*, 1988.) 25th July.

Green, Sharon. **Dawn Song**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-75453-3, 373pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; unbound proof copy received; this is possibly part of a series.) September.

Niven, Larry. **N-Space**. Introduction by Tom Clancy. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85089-1, 509pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; a massive Niven sampler, it contains extracts from *Ringworld* and other novels, plus numerous short stories, reminiscences, author's notes, etc.) September.

Tiptree, James, Jr. **Her Smoke Rose Up Forever**. Introduction by John Clute. Illustrations by Andrew Smith. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-160-9, 520pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf collection, first edition; a splendid "Best of Tiptree" containing 18 stories and beautifully produced in the usual impeccable Arkham style.) 10th August.

Wilson, F. Paul. **Reborn**. Berkley/Jove, ISBN 0-515-10343-8, 344pp, paperback, \$4.95. (Horror novel, first edition; sequel to *The Keep*.) 1st June.

Magazines Received June 1990

The following is a list of all English-language sf- and fantasy-related journals, magazines and small-press periodicals received by Interzone during the month specified above. It includes overseas publications as well as those from the UK. (Some foreign titles reach us late if they have been posted seamount.)

Aboriginal Science Fiction no. 22, July-August 1990. ISSN 0895-3198. 68pp. Ed. Charles C. Ryan, PO Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849, USA. Bimonthly fiction magazine. US quarto size, with full-colour cover and a few internal colour illustrations. Contributors: Esther M. Friesner, Mike Resnick, etc. \$14 per annum, USA; \$17, overseas.

Auguries no. 12, undated. ISSN 0954-1918. 52pp. Ed. Nik Morton, 48 Anglesey Rd., Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants. PO12 2EQ. Irregular (?) small-press fiction magazine. A5 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Sydney J. Bounds, Dorothy Davies, Matthew Dickens, etc. £7 for four issues, UK; \$20, USA. (Note: this magazine is a member of the New SF Alliance clearing-house; write to the address of BBR for further details – c/o Chris Reed, 16 Somersall Lane, Chesterfield, Derbys. S40 3LA.)

Dagon no. 27, June 1990. No ISSN shown. 60pp. Ed. Carl T. Ford, 11 Warwick Rd., Twickenham, Middx. TW2 6SW. Irregular small-press magazine of dark fantasy and Lovecraftiana. A5 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Frank Chimesleep Short, H. P. G. Wodehouse, etc. (this issue is announced as an "HPL Humour Special"). £7 for five issues, UK; \$20, USA. (Surprisingly, the editor announces that he will be discontinuing publication after issue 32.)

Fear no. 19, July 1990. ISSN 0954-8017. 84pp. Ed. John Gilbert, c/o Newsfield, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1JW. Monthly horror-fiction and film magazine. A4 size, with full-colour cover and many internal colour illustrations. Contributors: John Brunner, Stratford A. Kirby, etc. (interviews with Terry Pratchett & Neil Gaiman, among others). £16 per annum, UK; £23, Europe; \$49.50, USA (North American subscribers should write to British Magazine Distributors Ltd, 598 Durham Cres., Unit 14, Woodstock, Ontario N4S 5X3, Canada – who also handle Interzone.) Note: the magazine has benefited from an internal redesign with this issue, and is now printed on better-quality paper.

Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction no. 47, Winter, 1989/1990. ISSN 0306-4964. 104pp. Ed. Edward James, c/o The SF Foundation, Polytechnic of East London, Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2AS. Thrice-yearly critical journal of high standards. A5 size, perfect bound, sans illustrations. Contributors: Gregory Benford, Richard Grant, Nicholas Ruddick, Gary Westfahl, etc. £8.50 per annum, UK; \$17, USA. (Note: despite its "Winter" date, this issue did indeed appear in June; the editor has promised to catch up by producing his next couple of issues in relatively rapid succession.)

Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field no. 353, June 1990. ISSN 0047-4959. 76pp. Ed. Charles N. Brown, PO Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661, USA. Monthly

news magazine. US quarto size, with full-colour cover and mainly black-and-white interior illustrations. Contributors: Faren Miller, Tom Whitmore, Russell Letson, etc (interviews with Stephen R. Donaldson and Philip José Farmer). \$32 per annum, USA; \$37, overseas seaimail; \$60, overseas airmail (UK subscription agent: Fantast [Medway] Ltd, PO Box 23, Upwell, Wisbech, Cambs. PE14 9BU).

Maelstrom no. 5, May-August 1990. ISSN 0955-3975. 44pp. Ed. Malcolm E. Wright, Sol Publications, 31 Chiltern, Coleman St., Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS2 5AE. Thrice-yearly small-press fiction magazine. A5 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: C. P. James, Alasdair McLeod, Edmund Harwood, etc. £3.30 per annum, UK; \$10, USA (payable to "Sol Publications").

New York Review of Science Fiction no. 22, June 1990. No ISSN shown. 24pp. Eds. Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell, Gordon Van Gelder et al, c/o Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA. Monthly critical journal. US quarto size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Justin Leiber, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Michael Swanwick, etc. \$24 per annum, USA; \$36, overseas (payable to "Dragon Press").

New York Review of Science Fiction no. 23, July 1990. No ISSN shown. 24pp. Eds. Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell, Gordon Van Gelder et al, c/o Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA. Monthly critical journal. US quarto size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Samuel R. Delany, Greg Cox, Paul Williams, etc. \$24 per annum, USA; \$36, overseas (payable to "Dragon Press").

Peake Studies no. 4, Summer 1990. ISSN 1013-1191. 44pp. Ed. G. Peter Winnington, Les 3 Chasseurs, 1413 Orzens, Vaud, Switzerland. Irregular critical journal, "dedicated to the life and work of Mervyn Peake." A5 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Colin Greenland, Lesley Marx, etc. £12, UK; \$20, USA ("subscriptions are on a per page basis").

Scavenger's Newsletter no. 76, June 1990. ISSN 0894-2617. 32pp. Ed. Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-1329, USA. Monthly fanzine for small-press writers. Half US quarto size, black and white throughout. Contributors: various; it consists mainly of market reports, listings of magazines, and anecdotes of writers' dealings with various publications. \$10 per annum, USA; \$18, overseas (UK agent Cecil Nurse, 49 Station Rd., Haxby, York YO3 8LU, has copies available at 1.25 each.)

Science Fiction Chronicle no. 130, July 1990. ISSN 0195-5365. 44pp. Ed. Andrew I. Porter, PO Box 2730, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0056, USA. Monthly news magazine. US quarto size, with full-colour cover and mainly black-and-white interior illustrations. Contributors: Don D'Amassa, Steve Jones & Jo Fletcher, Ed Naha, etc. \$27 per annum, USA; £25, UK (the latter payable to "Algol Press," c/o Ethel Lindsay, 69 Barry Rd., Carnoustie, Angus DD7 7QQ).

Science-Fiction Studies no. 51, July 1990. ISSN 0091-7729. 160pp. Eds. Robert M. Philmus and Charles Elkins, c/o English Dept., Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke St. W., Montreal, Quebec H4B 1R6, Canada. Thrice-yearly critical journal of high academic standards. Book-shaped, perfect bound, sans illustrations. Contributors: Veronica Hollinger, Kathleen L. Spencer, etc. (this is a special issue devoted to "Science Fiction by Women"). \$14 per annum, USA; \$16.50, overseas (payable to "SFS Publications").

Skeleton Crew no. 1, July 1990. ISSN 0959-8006. 64pp. Ed. Dave Hughes, Argus House, Boundary Way, Hemel Hempstead HP2 7ST. Monthly horror-fiction magazine. A4 size, with full-colour cover and some colour interior illustrations. Contributors: Clive Barker, Stephen King, Mark Morris, etc. (the King story is a reprint and Barker's contribution consists of a few drawings). £23.40 per annum, UK; \$56, USA. (Note: although it says "Volume 2, Issue 1" inside, this is effectively the first appearance of a new professional magazine – although we never saw it, we are told that it had a short-lived previous incarnation as a small-press magazine for Stephen King fans.)

The Skeptic vol. 4 no. 3, May-June 1990. ISSN 0959-5228. 28pp. Eds. Steve Donnelly and Toby Howard, PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH. Bimonthly non-fiction magazine devoted to "a rational look at pseudoscience and the paranormal in the British Isles." A4 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: Dave Langford, Anthony Garrett, etc. (Langford's piece, about UFO matters, also appeared in a recent *New York Review of SF*.) £10 per annum, UK; 14, overseas.

Starburst no. 143, July 1990. ISSN 0955-114X. 52pp. Ed. Stephen Payne, Visual Imagination Ltd, PO Box 371, London SW14 8JL. Monthly sf/fantasy media magazine. A4 size, with full-colour cover and some internal colour illustrations. Contributors: various (includes an interview with Stephen Laws). £22 per annum, UK; \$40, USA. (Note: appearing at the same time as this issue is *Starburst Summer Special '90*, with 64 pages and priced at £2.50.)

Sweet Dreams, Baby! no. 1, May 1990. ISSN 0958-7772. 40pp. Ed. Adrian Hodges, 3 Ashfield Close, Bishops Cleeve, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 4LG. Small-press fiction-and-poetry magazine, frequency unspecified. A5 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: P. J. Radford, Mark Rich, Bruce P. Baker, etc. £4.50 for four issues, UK. (Note: this appears to be a stablemate for the same editor/publisher's recently-launched *Nova SF*.)

TV Zone no. 8, July 1990. ISSN 0957-3844. 32pp. Ed. Jan Vincent-Rudzki, Visual Imagination Ltd, PO Box 371, London SW14 8JL. Monthly sf/fantasy-on-TV magazine. A4 size, with full-colour cover and some internal colour illustrations. Contributors: various. £15 per annum, UK; \$28, USA.

Vector: The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association no. 156, June-July 1990. ISSN 0505-1448. 24pp. Eds. Boyd Parkinson and Kev McVeigh, 11 Marsh St., Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria LA14 2AE. Bimonthly critical magazine for members of the BSFA. A4 size, black and white throughout. Contributors: John Brunner, etc (interview with Paul J. McAuley). Membership of the BSFA is £12 per annum from Joanne Raine, Membership Secretary, 33 Thornville Rd., Hartlepool, Cleveland TS26 8EW. (Note: this issue came bundled with *Paperback Inferno* no. 84, a 16pp review of paperbacks, ed. Andy Sawyer; and *Matrix* no. 88, a 24pp news magazine, ed. Jenny Glover.)

White Dwarf no. 127, July 1990. ISSN 0265-8712. 84pp. Ed. Simon Forrest, Games Workshop Design Studio, Enfield Chambers, 14-16 Low Pavement, Nottingham NG1 7DL. Monthly sf/fantasy games magazine. US quarto size (approx.), with full-colour cover and some colour interior illustrations. Contributors: Rick Priestley, William King, etc. £18 per annum, UK; 36, overseas. (Note: it has an audited circulation of over 58,000 copies per month, which probably means it has the highest sale of any UK-published magazine associated with sf – apart from comics such as *2000 AD*.)

IMAGINARY PEOPLE: David Pringle's *Who's Who of Modern Fictional Characters* (Grafton, 1987, £14.95) is still available from *Interzone* at just £6 per copy (postage included). Overseas price £7.50 or US \$12 by sea mail (sorry, contrary to the advert in *IZ* 37, no airmail orders can be accepted). It's a hardcover book of over 500 pages, packed with information about imaginary people from Robinson Crusoe to J.R. Ewing and beyond. Order yours now from *Interzone*, 124 Osborne Rd., Brighton BN1 6LU, UK.

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BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5, 7, 16 and 17). They cost £2.30 each inland (postage included), or £2.50 each overseas (USA: \$4 sea mail, or \$5 air mail). However, UK purchasers who buy three or more in one order may have them at £1.95 each (i.e. post free).

Interaction

Continued from p.5

All I get from Platt's stuff is a sort of weary contempt and loathing. Platt calls himself a "professional," and if writing is his sole source of income this is literally true – but a true professional would take pride in producing the best work he was capable of within his brief, and this Platt seemingly didn't do.

The actual mechanics of customizing a story to a world are nothing compared to the generation of its central premise. It would appear that he didn't bother with one – and £1,000 strikes me as about right for hammering on a keyboard for a month, whatever the quality of the writing.

Some mad bugger give me ten thousand pounds for a book, and I'd have a damn serious crack at coming up with an idea worth nine thousand.

David Stone

Long Melford, Suffolk

Dear Editors:

Nick Lowe's film review in IZ 35 contains an error which should not go uncorrected. He states that the new Disney film of *The Little Mermaid* "adulterates Anderson's story with a happy ending." I assume the incorrect spelling of Andersen is the result of sloppy proof-reading, but a look at the story shows that it is provided with a happy ending. The mermaid has died because she is unable to kill the prince and so restore herself to mermaid form. But, in her sacrifice, she is able to begin the long task of gaining for herself an immortal soul. The ending is, by no means, upbeat but, given Andersen's own strong belief in salvation, it cannot be described as unhappy. I have had no chance to see the Disney film – in fact I view the prospect of the sickly, sentimental Disney reworking of Andersen's tale with a great deal of alarm. Doubtless, it will do a disservice to Andersen, who was a marvellous, complex and highly original author

and not to be dismissed as merely a writer of fairy tales. I do not like to see IZ treating Andersen in the same cavalier fashion as, I suspect, Disney will do.

Neil Harvey

Talybont, Dyfed

Dear Editors:

I'm glad you disagreed with Stanley Aspittle's negative comments about the interior illustrations ("Interaction," IZ 37); they're one of the reasons I buy *Interzone*. There have been a few illustrations I could live without, but most illustrate the story quite nicely, and a few enhance the story greatly. Mike Hadley's illustrations for Kim Newman's "The Original Doctor Shade" gave what was already a front-runner for story-of-the-year a nice edge; it took a while for me to convince myself that they weren't original 1930s illustrations. Tina Horner's illustrations for Neil Ferguson's "One-Way to Wap Wap" made a (to me) mediocre story seem quite radical.

Anyway, issue 37: all good stuff, except Keith Brooke's story which I didn't like at all; I can't imagine someone sitting still and philosophizing while being castrated. I'd have at least said, "Flippin' 'eck, leave off." Greg Egan's story was particularly brilliant; I'm still considering all the implications of it. How can such a short story have so much depth and so many levels?

Liked Bruce Sterling's piece, even if his language is a bit geeky. Does anyone really say "cool"? I liked the way he covered the *Whole Earth* catalogue, something which isn't directly related to sf but which will be of particular interest to sf enthusiasts. More please.

T.J. Mason

Halifax

Dear Editors:

When I first started receiving *Interzone* a few months ago, I have to admit I was not altogether certain what to expect,

but now I find myself looking forward to each new issue.

The standard of the fiction is certainly high and covers a nicely varied range of styles from the gentler face of Cyberpunk in Charles Stross' "Yellow Snow" to the disturbing ending of Keith Brooke's "The Mother." To find those two in a single issue, together with Greg Egan's "Learning to be Me," was a real joy. That last one, however, nearly lost me with its narrative shift towards the end: I think I only worked it out properly after a good night's sleep and half a morning concentrating on other things, as if it were a Zen koan.

Thanks for the enjoyments you've provided me with so far, and rest assured that when my subscription comes up for renewal, I shall do so without hesitation.

C. Bramhall

Isle of Man

Dear Editors:

Your "Interaction" section of the June 1990 issue of *Interzone* calls for readers to send in their choices for "out-of-the-way sf books that may have eluded your readers. Below are my humble choices for Ten Overlooked Science Fiction Novels.

- 1) *Limbo* (1952) by Bernard Wolfe
- 2) *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) by Brian Aldiss
- 3) *Downward To The Earth* (1970) by Robert Silverberg
- 4) *Tower of Glass* (1970) by Robert Silverberg
- 5) *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) by Ursula K. LeGuin
- 6) *The Walking Shadow* (1979) by Brian Stableford
- 7) *Them Bones* (1984) by Howard Waldrop
- 8) *Dream Games* (1985) by Karl Hansen
- 9) *Santiago* (1986) by Mike Resnick
- 10) *A Talent for War* (1989) by Jack McDevitt

George Ware

Dayton, Maryland

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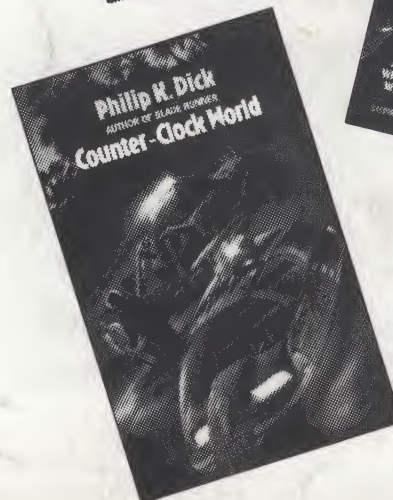
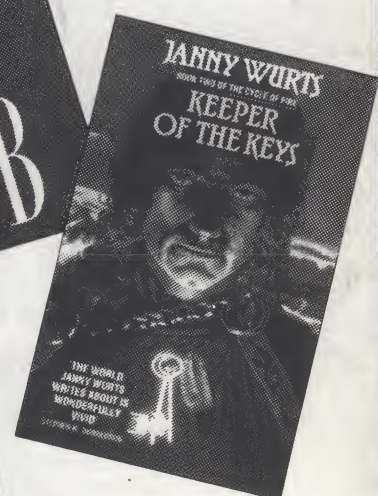
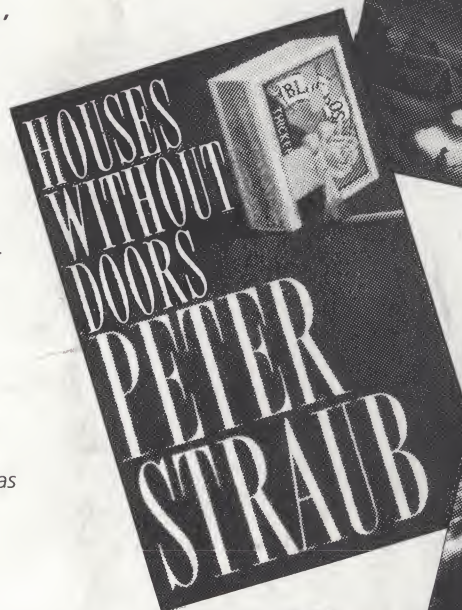
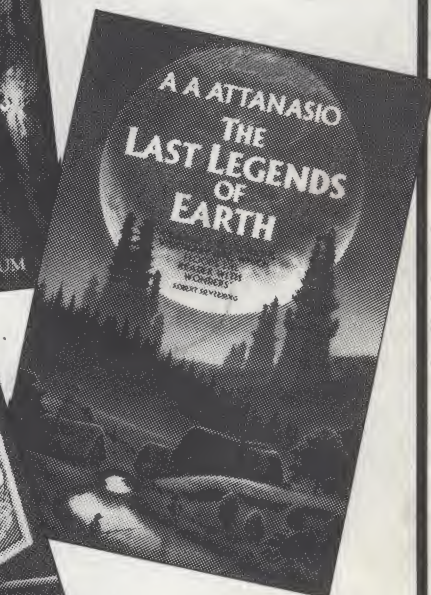
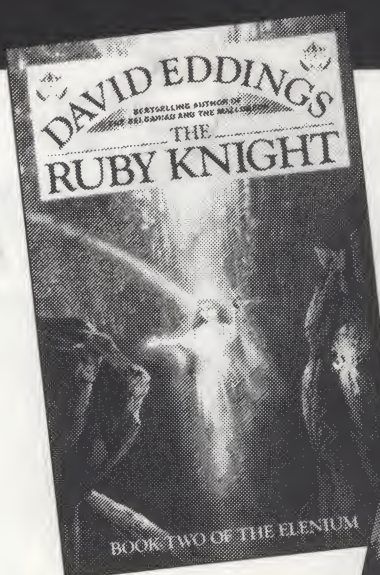
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